

BLUNDER'S MYSTERY COMPANIONS





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Blunder's Mystery Companions





THE OLD CHEST IN THE GARRET



**BLUNDER'S
MYSTERY
COMPANIONS**

FLORENCE M. PETTEE

**WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
WILHELMINA HARPER**



**ILLUSTRATED BY
ALEXANDER KEY**



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BOYS' AND GIRLS' ADVENTURE LIBRARY
INSPIRING LIVES OF SIXTY FAMOUS MEN
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FIGHTING FOR CUBA
ICEBOUND IN THE SOUTH POLAR SEAS
ADVENTURES OF LAFAYETTE

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FOREWORD

Those of us engaged in library work with children know that there are two types of stories that have an invariable appeal to most all young people — the “adventure” and the “mystery” story. It is often difficult to find books of this kind with sufficient action, human interest, and embodying worthy ideals of conduct throughout.

In *BLUNDER'S MYSTERY COMPANIONS*, Miss Pettee has provided an unusual combination of vivid historical narrative and adventure, together with several thrilling mystery stories which will be sure to delight the hearts of all young readers.

The author seems to have expert knowledge of children's interests, and even in her most exciting tale she is careful that no point is overdrawn.

The first eight chapters in the book form separate stories surrounding ancient objects which some young people unearth from an old chest in the garret. They are the basis of fascinating tales of the old days in history, tales of Indians and the sea; and the last four stories deal with ghosts and deep mysteries which the

FOREWORD—Continued

young people solve in quite natural manner, and with no undue show of either bravado or heroism.

Each story in the book may be recommended as wholesome and full of vivid interest to both young and old.

WILHELMINA HARPER.



PUBLISHERS' NOTE

Blunder's mystery companions are the chief characters in each episode of the entire book.

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THE SKELETON HEAD STILL HOVERED THERE

BLUNDER'S MYSTERY COMPANIONS

I

THE SECRET OF THE EBONY BOX

Raindrops lanced the garret window with stinging, silver needles. Under the eaves it was so dark that the figures there moved like ghostly silhouettes.

"I'll get the key," offered Blunder-Beth.

She tripped over the foot of the spinning-wheel and sprawled on the sagging, time-worn floor. She picked herself up lightly, a laughing, good-humored, dark-eyed girl of fifteen, and shook her brown bob vigorously.

"Skinned my knee," she declared to Nancy, who came forward with a disturbed face. Nancy never blundered into things as did the clumsy, awkward Blunder-Beth.

"You and Steven get the old chest out from under the eaves," suggested Beth as she disappeared down the creaking, uneven garret stairs. "I'm sure grandmother will give us the key."

Nancy and Steven fumbled about in the gloom. They brought out from under the cobwebs and the dust a long, black, brass-studded chest, which was mysteriously heavy. It was powdered with dust. The metal was freckled with rust, and the keyhole was as huge as one might expect to find on some dungeon door.

With a faint, protesting squeak of garret boards they lugged the chest to the single window with its festoons of cobwebs, its coating of neglect. The rain pattered against the panes with redoubled insistence.

On one end of the dusky, old chest was painted in dim but discernible letters: *Capt. Nahum Hutchinson, Bath, Me., U. S. A.*

"That must have been great-great-grandfather," observed Nancy thoughtfully. "I do hope grandmother will let us look inside. It's just like a treasure-chest."

"Full of old clothes mostly," decided Steven with boyish scorn and wisdom. "Who cares about old clothes!"

"Maybe," murmured Nancy, "a story goes with each one. I've a game in mind for this wet day. Here comes Beth now."

Beth's sturdy figure came to view from a tunnel made by the crooking stairs. She dangled a huge, dark object.

“The key!” she announced. “And grandmother says we may look about as much as we please, provided we are careful and set things to rights when we are through.”

“Fine!” said Nancy. “Now listen to my plans. Let’s draw lots. I’ll pick three straws from the old broom in the corner. The one of us who gets the longest shall have first choice as to which thing in the old chest seems most likely to have a tale attached to it.”

“Good idea,” approved Steven grandly. “I always was lucky. I’ll pick the long straw. See if I don’t!”

Nancy came back with the three bits sticking up above her thumb and first finger, their lengths hidden inside her tightly clenched fist.

“Ladies first,” murmured Steven, clicking his heels together and making a sweeping bow in Beth’s direction

Beth pulled out a straw. It was short and stubby like herself.

“That’s not it,” she declared. “Well, I don’t want the responsibility of choosing something with a history.”

“Now it’s your turn, Steven,” reminded Nancy.

Steven put his head first on one side, then on the other. His heavy, tortoise-rimmed spec-

tacles made him look like a sober old owl. The girls laughed. He finally pulled out a straw that seemed endless in length.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Beth. "Who would have supposed that Nancy could have held such a long piece inside her fist!"

"Steve's luck is holding," laughed Nancy. "That's the one. Give him the key, Beth. Let's see what Sir Wisdom will select. And there is a penalty, you know, Steven."

"Penalty!" Beth and the boy echoed.

"Yes. You know how grandmother loves to tell a story if she is given the proper incentive. Well, whatever you choose we shall take straight down to her in the sewing-room. We'll ask her if there is a story connected with your selection. If she says yes, you'll get another choice."

"And if no?" demanded Steven.

"The next choice falls to Beth, and you don't listen in."

"I'll pick a blue-ribbon winner, all right; don't worry."

Steven inserted the heavy, rusty key. The lock was shot with a grating protestation. Up came the heavy cover with further groans from the ancient chest.

"My, but it's heavy!"

An odor of must and foreign incense came forth stealthily, alluringly. Inside were clothes, chiefly; elegant, velvet topcoats, gay in metal buttons; frilled shirts; satin knee breeches; buckled shoes; coats which grandmother would have called redingotes; a leather belt with a dark leather scabbard and the hilt of a short sword projecting. There were short, snouty, clumsy pistols—horse pistols.

Steven wavered. "Now, this short sword," he began, fingering it tentatively.

Beth's bobbed head was well inside the deep chest. Her sturdy body was doubled over like a jack-knife.

"Oh, look, Stevie! Look at that black box!"

"An ebony box!" exclaimed Nancy. "All filigreed over with dark, tarnished metal!"

"Probably silver," declared Beth in a stage whisper. "And it's all carved, too."

Reluctantly Steven put down the scabbard. He picked up the black box and examined it.

"My, it's a beauty! Some dove-tailing of joints. And such carving! I know what it is to try to carve ebony! It's as hard as horn. I tried to carve a paper-knife out of a thin wedge of it down in the manual training room last week. It isn't finished yet. Been spending most of my time sharpening over my carv-

ing set. My, but this is a beauty! Foreign made." He turned the dull, black box over. "There's no 'Made in any place' label on it."

"They didn't add that in the old days," commented Nancy. "Beautiful things then spoke for themselves, without having to be labeled. Looks Chinese or Japanese to me. Well, great-great-grandfather called at many ports in the *Silver Spray*."

Still Steven squinted at the black box. He dropped the discarded scabbard.

"Maybe I'm choosing something that isn't extraordinary," he said, "but this carved, ebony box looks mysterious, and——" He weighed it on his palm. "——something shakes inside it. Therefore it's not empty. I'll take this ebony box."

Beth led them down the stairs at a galloping pace.

Still the rain sounded a loud tattoo on the roof. The darkness had increased until it reminded Beth of the box Steven had chosen.

.

Downstairs an old lady put aside her knitting. Slowly she took off her near-sighted spectacles and tucked them away in a spacious bag. From under her workbasket she brought

out another pair of glasses and wiped the lenses thoughtfully as she adjusted them.

"So you want a story," she said.

"Isn't there one connected with this box, grandmother?" asked Steven, as he brought forth the ebony box from behind his back.

The elderly lady took it. She put her knitting in the work-basket and laid the box carefully in her lap. Her frail fingers touched it ever so lightly.

"I heard my father tell the story of this box many a time."

Steven placed his thumbs at his armpits and spread his hands wide in a magnificent gesture.

"I picked it," he told the girls triumphantly.

Nancy winked laughingly at Beth. The wink said, "You rascal! 'Twas you who picked out the black box. But never mind. It has a story. What does it matter who found it!"

Beth smiled, turned around suddenly, and upset Grandmother Stanton's knitting. The big balls of yarn rolled in various directions, becoming hopelessly entangled.

"Ladies and gentlemen," began Steve in a falsetto stage voice, as he swung imaginary

coat tails behind his back. He pointed to Beth, who crawled about on all fours retrieving the runaway yarn. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have with us the great and noble None-such, the Countess Blunderbuss of Tumbletown."

"Now Steven," began Grandmother Stanton's gentle, chiding voice. "Beth is just enthusiastic. Her sharp eyes spy so many things at once that her feet get tangled up, trying to find out all about them. Some day Beth will have the laugh on you."

"'Twas just a joke, grandmother," added Steven worriedly. "Because it's rather comical, I must say, the way Beth always blunders into anything. . . . So the box has a story," he finished, like the youthful diplomat he was.

"Ah, yes," sighed the old lady. "I've heard my father tell it many a time, even as his father told it to him."

"How does it open, grandmother?" asked Nancy. "There doesn't seem to be a keyhole."

"It's a trick Japanese box. You note the wonderful carving, especially on this dragon's head."

"Yes, yes," they chorused.

"When I press it—so, a little spring is released and . . ."

Obediently followed a little click as if the

ancient, slumbering box had suddenly awakened from its century-deep sleep. The beautiful dark lid flew up.

Their excited "Ahs" next rippled forth. Even Steven dropped his mock-quizzical air.

The ebony box was lined with faded, crimson silk which had long since turned brown. On the dim, shining, wrinkled lining coiled a long string of milk-white, satiny drops of graded sizes.

"Pearls!" exclaimed Beth. "How beautiful they are!"

Gently, wistfully, their grandmother touched the midmost, largest, gleaming globule. Slowly she shook her head.

Sadly she said, "That was what grandfather believed until an expert in gems told him that they were marvelous imitations."

"Not genuine!"

Again she shook her head.

"Why should imitations be kept in such a magnificent case?" demanded Steven.

The old lady drew out the gleaming string. She held it thoughtfully in her fingers.

"I will tell you the story," she said.

"Like all your ancestors, on the Stanton side, your great-great-grandfather Hutchinson was a master mariner. He became a cap-

tain when only twenty-one—captain of the brig, the *Silver Spray*. He brought various cargoes from foreign lands in exchange for our own. Once he called at a South American port for a cargo of coffee. While there he met a young Frenchman by the name of de la Vare. The young Frenchman knew much of the sea; and as grandfather needed a first mate, he gave de la Vare the berth on the *Silver Spray*. He liked the young fellow tremendously, and they became close friends. It developed that his new first mate was a young man of extraordinary polish and culture. He had traveled everywhere and knew the sea even as grandfather did. He was also an expert swordsman. As the months went by, the intimacy between the two had strengthened. They then called at the port of Jamestown, Va. Here young de la Vare confided to your great-great-grandfather that he was not de la Vare, but a young French count who had been in difficulties at home and had been forced to go away. The reason he revealed this secret now was because in Jamestown he had encountered the old enemy who had caused him the trouble and his subsequent flight. On the night in question he and grandfather talked in grandfather's cabin—talked until dawn. For the

upshot of the awkward meeting was that the young count had challenged the stranger to a duel, in accordance with the code of his country and the custom of the time. The affair was to take place at daybreak. Grandfather had been prevailed upon to act as the count's second."

"Yes, yes," put in Steven excitedly.

Beth reached for the pearls. She touched them carefully, almost reverently. The story took on flesh and blood in her active imagination. She could see that rough, snug little cabin, her sturdy, rugged, down-East ancestor, and the young French gallant.

"Before they left the *Silver Spray* the young Frenchman went to his cabin. He weighted his little trunk with shot and flung it overboard with all his possessions except"

"The ebony box!" exclaimed Beth, standing up with the string of pearls dangling from her fingers.

Grandmother nodded. "These he took to grandfather. 'Monsieur Nahum,' he said, for he called grandfather that, 'these are the only things, the only proofs I have to my story that I have gentle, noble blood. The other proof I sink to the waters of the bay along with my

identity, if fortune passes me by and I do not return from this *affaire d'honneur*. This valuable family heirloom I give to you, Monsieur Nahum, as a token of my very great regard and affection for you. It is all I have. It is a talisman of a great family. It has often been dipped in blood. It is worth a king's ransom. Men have fought and died for it, men of many stations and callings. I give it to you as a slight token of my great regard for you.' The two shook hands over the ebony box in the flickering, sputtering light of the crude cabin.

"The young Frenchman went to his affair of honor, as he called it. Though he was a wonderful swordsman, his dark-skinned opponent was more wonderful. Grandfather's first mate received a mortal wound from the unknown stranger's sword. He died without giving his true name or identity, requesting grandfather to bury him at sea. Grandfather did this, and he treasured the ebony box as some sacred, hallowed thing."

Grandmother paused. Even now her throat was a bit husky with emotion. She was back in the long ago. Evidently she had heard the story so many times that it lived in the flesh for her.

“One day,” she continued, “the second mate was in grandfather’s cabin. Grandfather had been examining the keepsake. He hid the little string in his heavy coat cuff, for the Frenchman’s secret had died with him. During the interview with the second mate grandfather forgot the hastily concealed pearls; and as he bent over the chest explaining some point on the chart, they slid to the floor. The mate stooped and picked them up. He was an Englishman who had traveled much and knew a great deal. He examined the pearls carefully before he returned them into grandfather’s keeping. Then he said, ‘A magnificent string of imitations, Captain Hutchinson. I have seldom seen better.’

“‘What!’ grandfather exclaimed, pale to the lips, for the pearls had become a sacred keepsake to him.

“‘Yes,’ repeated the second mate, ‘I spent many years on a pearler in the archipelago, dickering with the natives for pearls. I knew them as I know my compass. These are a fine imitation, but—that’s all. I hope, sir, you’re not out of pocket, that some sly rascal didn’t sell them to you for the genuine thing.’

“‘No, no,’ answered grandfather, ‘they’re—they’re a gift.’

“‘Gift!’ exclaimed the mate in astonishment. ‘Rather a poor gift, the giving of a string of imitations.’

“For, in those days,” she told the intent group about her, “imitation was regarded with disdain, even with contempt. When the mate left the cabin, grandfather would have wept had he been a woman. It wasn’t so much the value of the pearls as it was what the young, self-styled count had told him—that they were a token, a rare and priceless token of his esteem for grandfather, that they were worth a king’s ransom, that they had been in his family for years.”

“Maybe,” declared Beth excitedly, “some one had stolen the originals and substituted this imitation string without the poor Frenchman’s knowing it.”

“Grandfather would have been quick to grasp at that straw, had not his friend shown an extraordinary knowledge of all gems, particularly pearls. He could not have been deceived by the substitutes. The discovery saddened grandfather. It was hard to believe that his young friend had been a pretender like the pearls. So we’ve always kept grandfather’s string of pearls hidden away, even as he kept them and requested that they be kept.”

Beth leaned forward excitedly.

“Grandmother,” she exclaimed, “don’t you suppose—”

In her excitement the string of pearls slid from her fingers in true Blunder-Beth style. With a flash they slid under Grandmother Stanton’s heavy wooden rocker. As the elderly woman leaned forward and bent down, the rocker went *crunch* on the midmost pearls.

Beth uttered a little cry. “Oh, grandmother, the rocker has crunched three of them! And it was all my stupid fault. O grandmother, I’m so sorry!”

She bent down contritely and picked up the string with its broken beads. Some of the distress left her face.

“Why, why—” she exclaimed, holding them out on her palm.

They all drew close.

On her brown hand lay the three big pearls, cracked and broken. But what had cracked under the weight of the rocker was only the thin outer coating, and on Beth’s palm three flashes of green now blazed forth, freed of the imitation pearl covering.

“Emeralds!” ejaculated Steven. “They must be genuine! Emeralds! So they were a real talisman! The count told the truth! To

protect the great family heirloom against thievery and loss he had some skilled Japanese craftsman coat them with a skinlike covering closely resembling the pearl. The Japanese have known the secret for centuries. And the box is probably Japanese. He counted on great-great-grandfather's belief and cleverness to discover the substitute—the secret—in time."

Grandmother Stanton's face shone joyously. "Oh, I'm so glad!" she said. "I always felt so sorry for that poor Frenchman. Maybe you're right, Steven. I'll get a jeweler to examine them."

When the little jeweler called, sometime later, his enthusiasm was second only to that of Grandmother Stanton's.

"A magnificent string of emeralds," he adjudged them from his expert knowledge of gems. "I've never seen finer. Old, rare, and worth a king's ransom."

So Steven Stanton, with the aid of Blunder-Beth, picked out a real prize from the depths of that dusty old chest in the garret.

II

THE SNARING OF SCARLET FEATHER

The trees bowed low under the boisterous breath of the breeze. It was as if Herculean fingers wielded a mammoth pair of bellows. The rain fell in diagonal sheets piercing the dusk with long javelins of silver.

Steven shook his head, staring weatherwise out the shed door.

"It's no use." He glanced disappointedly at rod, reel, and fresh cans of bait. "The bushes would be soaked. And there's no trout worth angling for except those in Strothy's stream—in the woods. Not that we fellows would mind," he added, looking at his cousin David who had arrived from the city two days before, "but the girls," nodding at Nancy and Beth. "Well, they would not enjoy themselves in weather like this."

"Ough!" ejaculated Blunder-Beth suddenly. "Help me untangle this snarl, Nancy. Please. My line's all snagged around my reel."

Steven made a sweeping bow. He doffed an imaginary, broad-brimmed hat in Beth's direction.

"Ladies and gentlemen. We now have with us the Great and None-such Blunder-Beth—"

Nancy's swift fingers expertly untangled the snarl Beth had made of her line.

"Steven," she suggested, "don't look so woebe-gone. There're better days coming. Let's go fishing—in the garret."

"In the garret," repeated David with a puzzled glance at her. "What's the answer?"

Steven's face brightened. "Come on! That'll be jolly! Wait until you see our buried treasure in the garret. Heigho! I'll race you to the back stoop!"

All four of them were off like a streak. Shortly they were *clump—clumping* up the worn stairs to the mysterious darkness of the eaves and the low-beamed, dusty attic.

* * *

Bump, bump, bumpity-bump sounded from under the roof. In her sewing-room underneath Grandmother Stanton smiled from the frame, where she was hooking a rag rug of gorgeous gold dragons on a black ground.

"I wonder what they'll dig out this time," she murmured reminiscently, thinking of the surprising climax which the ebony box had furnished after a lapse of so many years.

"The key's over here on a nail in the beam,"

laughed Blunder-Beth. "I'll have it in a hurry. Drag the old chest to the window. We don't want to be lighting any candles. Too dry in here."

"Let David do the honors," suggested Nancy. "This old chest's a regular storehouse of treasures and mystery! See. It belonged to great-great-grandfather."

She gestured at the dusty, heavily-hinged, black chest which they had dragged out.

David fitted the ponderous key in the rusty lock. The hinges creaked like the time-worn mechanism on some ancient draw-bridge.

"Do we draw lots?" demanded Beth with an anticipative air.

"We do not," answered Steven quickly. "Last time you said if I picked a winner, I would have another choice. Well, the ebony box was a prime prize . . . But I'll hand over my choice to David," he ended with mock generosity. "Go on, David, dip in. Let's see what you'll choose."

"Oh, I say," protested David, "that's generous of you . . . My, what a lot of things! Fine old clothes, like they wore in Sheridan's *Rivals*, plumed hats, shoe-buckles, boxes—swords—horse-pistols . . . I hardly know

what I do want to pick. They can't all have stories attached to them."

Beth wagged her head sagely. "You've no idea," she confided, "how many stories grandmother knows. She's never at a loss for one. You'll have a hard time stumping her for a tale."

"Now the swords," temporized David, taking out a long, dark scabbard. "No, I don't believe I'll take a sword. Sword stories are all alike," he stated grandly, "like *The Three Guardsmen*, or *The Prisoner of Zenda*, or *The Count of Monte Cristo*. I want something more American. Let—me—see—"

From under an old coat he brought out a long string of scarlet feathers set into narrow pieces of dark-stained leather. It was gay with tiny shells fastened with thin thongs of leather. Or was it a shred of tough bark from some tree?

He placed the brilliant head-dress upon his head and uttered a loud whoop, brandishing an imaginary tomahawk.

"Must have belonged to the Grand Sachem of all the tribes! Come on! Let's hear what Grandmother Stanton has to say about these scarlet feathers!"

He took the stairs two at a time, with the others following close at his heels.

“Funny I didn’t see that,” Steven was debating. “Seemed to have been folded inside of that coat. I’m certain it has a wonderful story.”

The old lady before the rug frame smiled as she heard them coming rapidly down the stairs. David led them, brave in his array of scarlet feathers.

“Are you—are you too busy, grandmother—” began Nancy with her eyes on the rug.

Grandmother Stanton put her hook aside. She rubbed her right wrist.

“My old bones ache easily. And that burlap seems to be unusually close-meshed. No, I’d like a little time to rest . . . So you’ve made another marauding tour on the old chest! And David has discovered the top feathers of that warring, mischievous chief, Scarlet Feather!”

Beth clapped her hands. “Scarlet Feather!” she exclaimed. “It’s a fine name!”

“It’s a magnificent head-piece,” Grandmother Stanton told them. “It’s made of the finest wild-turkey feathers, dyed scarlet. See how it has withstood the passing of the years. The feathers are still deeply crimson. The

Indians knew how to brew fast colors from the herbs and from the soil—”

She stopped for a moment. She took off her spectacles to rest her eyes. She stared out through the rain-splashed panes. They knew that her mind was turned backwards many years, to some tale her father had told her. Or was it her grandfather? So they waited quietly.

“I’ll tell you the story of the snaring of Scarlet Feather, the wiliest, fiercest of his tribe. He was a brave, who carried many a scalp in his belt, who absolutely refused all gifts and advances from the little colony which had settled on his land. For the redskins always considered the early settlers as thieves and interlopers, who had merely appropriated what had been theirs for unbroken, long centuries.”

“We can’t blame them,” sympathized Blunder-Beth.

“Those were troublous times, when Scarlet Feather harassed, pillaged, and razed more than one gallant little stockade in the heart of that rugged Maine wilderness. History was daily in the making then, the history of great privation, of rock-ribbed courage, and the grit that comes from long years of the hardest struggle. Ah, we have traveled a long way from

those intrepid, uncomplaining times with our milk-and-water days of ease—”

They stirred uneasily. They hoped Grandmother Stanton wasn't starting in on a sermon!

She sensed their perturbation and smiled slightly. She laughed openly at Beth's wide, serious, gray eyes, at her tousled bob, and her sturdy, tanned fingers; at Steven, whose owl-ish, heavy-spectacled eyes were on David's gorgeous head-dress.

“Let me see,” she temporized tantalizingly. “I believe Scarlet Feather was chief of the Penobscot branch, but I'm not certain. However, it doesn't matter. He was the scarlet scourge of the little colony. Neither wile nor guile could stop his depredations. Now, Nahum Hutchinson, one of your ancestors, was then a sturdy young giant, six feet in his stockings, and with muscles like The Village Blacksmith.”

“Firm as iron bands,” murmured Blunder-Beth, the irrepressible.

A warning glance from Nancy silenced her. Grandmother Stanton mustn't be turned from her tale.

“So,” continued the old lady, “Nahum was then a lad of seventeen or thereabouts. His

father was captain of the stockade, and young Nahum was somewhat of an aide-de-camp, messenger and right-hand man to his father . . . There came a spell of unusual calm. After a disastrous sortie upon one of the neighboring colonies, Scarlet Feather and his braves loaded their canoes one night and paddled northward up the river. They were lost to sight. Even the oldest trappers and hunters of the colony believed that they had gone north to Canada—

“Peace fell once more upon the hardy little band of pioneers. For the first time in many moons they breathed freely. Captain Hutchinson organized parties for hunting trips, to bring in pelts, fish, reindeer meat, prairie chickens, grouse and wild turkeys, and to lay in a hasty store for the coming winter. Groups of the younger men, headed by young Nahum, went into the woods for timber. The battle-scarred little fort needed many strong reinforcements. More than one cabin roof had been seared by the blazing arrows of Scarlet Feather's braves, to be extinguished barely in time. So, day by day, they hastily made preparations for the winter, and to withstand further attacks, should Scarlet Feather or other tribes again infest the locality.

“Late in the fall, young Nahum went out,

early one morning, with his little band of timber-choppers. But Nahum, being more adventurous than the rest, worked his way into the woods away from the others. He was particularly anxious to find a fine, straight chestnut tree. For his mother wanted a new chest in which to store away the delicate old linens she had brought from England. So Nahum kept searching, for he was hard to please. And he did want a particularly fine chestnut. Finally he found just the one he was seeking. He started chopping with his great axe. The chips fell steadily from his sturdy blows. And the sound of the chopping must have echoed and re-echoed through the thick, silent forest. Sound carried a long way at mid-day—and to keen, skulking Indian ears.”

Blunder-Beth sighed ecstatically, as she always did when Indians were mentioned.

“Young Nahum finally felled the great tree expertly. It lay as he had planned for it to fall by the direction and the manner of his chopping. He had already hewn away a sturdy length from the butt, a log that might have been some twenty feet long, and three and a half or four in diameter. For undoubtedly it was a handsome chestnut. Now the next thing was to split the length—to cleave it nicely in

the center. From his homespun pocket, Nahum brought out a big wedge.

"You see," Grandmother Stanton explained, "the moment the initial crack was started for splitting a log, a wedge was inserted to hold it open. The wedge made subsequent axe blows more effective. With a tremendous blow of his axe Nahum started the first crack in the log. Then he drove the wedge hard into the crack near the big end of the log. Remember that, *at the big end of the log*. It was hard work. Even his strong young shoulders must have ached. As he straightened up to wipe the perspiration from his face, his quick eye caught the flash of something in the heavy underbrush just beyond the spot where he was working."

The little group about her caught their breath. The eyes of all volleyed to the crimson head-dress.

"It was the flash of something scarlet," she added significantly. "It was too large a patch of red for any feathered thing. Besides, crimson was the well-known badge of Scarlet Feather . . . Nahum must have thought very rapidly. But he gave no outward sign. He raised his kerchief to his face, as if to cleanse it of further moisture. He stared hard at the



ALEXANDER KEY

HE STARED AT SCARLET FEATHER

spot where he had spied the tell-tale sign. As he looked, he thought he could discern the piercing, black eyes and hideously painted face of Scarlet Feather watching him craftily.

“So Scarlet Feather and his blood-thirsty braves had returned! And never had the little settlement been more open to attack, more poorly prepared to withstand an Indian uprising! When Scarlet Feather was on the rampage, his braves were like devastating wild-fire . . . Nahum listened intently, as his eyes circled the space about him. There seemed to be no other lurking redskin. Perhaps Scarlet Feather himself, making a lone scouting trip, had come upon him unexpectedly in his lonely outpost. Perspiration poured down Nahum's face, the perspiration of agonizing realization. But he wasn't afraid for himself. For as soon as Scarlet Feather felled him with an arrow or a tomahawk, and learned of the defenceless position of the settlement, he'd bring his savage band down upon them all. He feared only for the fate of the little settlement.

“Nahum's musket lay many feet away. He had only his heavy axe and a glistening, new, slim-handled hunting-knife in his belt. The blade glittered like silver—and the handle was very thin. It had been a birthday present from

his father . . . Desperately Nahum tried to think of some way out. Why hadn't Scarlet Feather shot him from ambush before? Undoubtedly he had been given ample opportunity.

"Nahum's great axe lay against the heaviest, butt end of the fallen log. He stood out of reach of it—well along the log. Hurriedly he brought out his slim, gleaming hunting-knife. Its burnished blade glistened enticingly in a rift of sunlight. Silver danced along the blade. He held the knife so no gleam could escape the watching, greedy eyes of Scarlet Feather. For he well knew how childishly eager, even a warring Indian chief was for any glittering, new trapping.

"The bushes stirred slightly. Scarlet Feather's captivated gaze was riveted on the knife. Nahum's hand appeared to tremble above the broad crack. The knife slipped from his fingers—purposely. And the bright blade disappeared in the yawning, open crack of the huge log. Nahum uttered a pretended vexed exclamation. With unhurried stride he covered the distance to the big, butt end of the log, where his great axe lay. Faintly he heard the low swish of leaves. Came a cattish tread. But he pretended he didn't hear. Scarlet

Feather would not shoot him with bow and arrow now—at close range. As for the tomahawk—!

“Slowly Nahum looked up. Scarlet Feather stood some fifteen feet from him. His tomahawk was in his belt. He grunted gutturally. His bright, black eyes clung hypnotically to the crack where the gleaming hunting-knife had disappeared. Nahum knew that if he made the slightest unfriendly movement, the tomahawk would flash like lightning from Scarlet Feather’s belt into his own scalp. He knew that the Indian was only baiting him, lured by the gleam of the blade and whatever else had drawn him there and kept him watching.

“Again Scarlet Feather grunted. He pointed at the crack.

“Nahum nodded. ‘Hello,’ he said. ‘Want it?’

“Scarlet Feather understood a few words of English. He grunted disgustedly. He measured the distance between himself, Nahum and the big axe. It was entirely safe. Nahum couldn’t possibly hit him with the axe as he bent to get that very desirable, new knife. Scarlet Feather leaned forward. He dipped a sinewy hand into the crack.

“*Whack!* Quicker than a flash Nahum grabbed his big axe. He knocked the wedge out onto the ground. The crack in the log snapped together like a steel trap. Scarlet Feather’s right fingers were nipped securely inside!

“He howled with rage, pain and realization. He couldn’t reach his tomahawk with his other hand, nimble and expert as he was. Nahum now stood over him with his great axe. He grabbed the redskin’s untrapped hand with his own steel-strong hands. He whirled the Indian about and lashed his free hand to the trapped one, securely held in the great log. Then he bound Scarlet Feather’s ankles together, and staked him to the ground. Nahum had thus captured the chief of the tribe. Without his fiery, inciting spirit, the plans of the braves would be greatly upset. And it would give Nahum time to warn his father to prepare for an attack . . . In an agony of apprehension lest some other skulking Indian should discover Scarlet Feather’s predicament, Nahum raced to the nearest group of choppers and gave the alarm. When he came back with others from the sturdy group, Scarlet Feather was still helplessly and safely snared. In triumph they carried him into the fort.

“There they held him a prisoner for many weeks, until his chiefless band of braves retreated to parts unknown. Finally, Scarlet Feather himself, his pride broken, and weary of imprisonment, promised peace towards the colonists. Before he was deported, he insisted on giving to young Nahum his warring, scarlet head-dress as a token of his complete surrender and submission. It was as if he had taken a sword and handed it over to some triumphant general . . . So, for many months afterwards, the little colony lived in peace and prosperity, thanks to Nahum’s snaring of the troublesome chief, Scarlet Feather.”



III

THE HOLE IN THE WAISTCOAT

Steven pushed his glasses hastily on the top of his head and mopped his brow. The fire of battle glinted in his eyes.

“Now,” he told his grandmother, “I guess Mr. Crow and his militia-men will keep off for a while. I’ve rigged a scare-crow in the middle of the plot. It’s a good lively one with plenty of flapping ends. Now, we’ll see if my corn is riddled when this planting comes up!”

Grandmother Stanton smiled reminiscently. The sound of footsteps echoed from overhead. The girls were upstairs in the garret rummaging about in the old chest. There was to be a masquerade in the Town Hall next week—a colonial masquerade.

“They’re picking their own costumes, and yours, Steven.”

“I don’t want to go,” declared Steven. “All fussed up in satin togs. All right for the girls, but—”

The old lady looked at him over the tops of her glasses.

"You're very like your ancestor, Ezra Hutchinson," she said. "And I directed Beth to pick out a certain faded waistcoat especially—a snuff-colored waistcoat with its embroidery much the worse for wear. I knew you would object—until you heard the story concerning it."

Steven's face lightened.

"That's better," he accepted. "If it's had a real, red-blooded life and done something besides mince through a minuet! If there's a lively honest-to-goodness story in it, why, I could tell the fellows and—"

Nancy and Beth bumped open the door. They were laden with old-time clothes; poke-bonnets, voluminous, frilled satin gowns, silk mitts, little high-heeled slippers . . .

Laughingly Blunder-Beth, as they called her, handed over a faded snuff-colored satin waistcoat to Steven.

"Behold, O Sir Mighty-and-Particular, the first feather to your gorgeous plumage!"

Steven fingered the waistcoat a bit disdainfully, although it was much plainer than many of the other befrilled and embroidered trifles in the old chest under the eaves.

"I thought," said Blunder-Beth, "that great-grand uncle—or whatever he was—Ezra

Hutchinson was a great dandy. Was this one of his waistcoats?"

"Yes," affirmed their grandmother, "one of the few plain ones he possessed—until after a certain, all-important night."

Steven was studying the faded relic with more attention.

"Oh, I say," he discovered, "there's a hole in the old satin, a hole big enough to stop a cow. Is it a bullet-hole?"

Grandmother Stanton nodded.

"That's the story. That's why this worn, old waistcoat has always been treasured."

"But he didn't die of a bullet-wound," recalled Beth.

"No. Yet it was this self-same colored waistcoat that cured Ezra Hutchinson of his fancy for fine feathers. It came to be the most prized of all his former elegant clothing."

"Now, Beth," she suggested, "if you'll skip up to the garret again, and search deep, you'll find a five-inch length of stout hickory pole with a tough knot scarring it. We must have that also."

They heard Blunder-Beth clumping noisily up the stairs. Then the scratching of the old chest dragged hastily towards the window. Soon Beth came scurrying back down the

stairs, two at a time.

"Here it is," she announced, giving it to her grandmother.

Ruefully she studied the right sleeve of her middy-blouse. It yawned under a jagged, three-cornered tear.

"I caught my sleeve in a nail," she confessed. "There's always something lurking somewhere ready to take a nip out of me!"

"When is Beth not Blunder-Beth?" laughed Steven.

"When she's asleep," answered Nancy promptly.

Grandmother Stanton held forth the gnarled bit of hickory pole.

"What do you see?" she demanded.

Steven replied immediately, "A faint scratch on that dark, old knot."

"Very well. Bear that in mind then. It, too, played a prominent part in curing Ezra Hutchinson of his flair for foppish waistcoats. It also won him a commission in the Continental Army—a commission which his father had previously refused to permit him to seek."

They strained forward alertly.

"Odd," mused the old lady, "how history repeats itself, with Steven coming in after setting a trap for the crows. And then Beth dig-

ging out the old waistcoat, with its pitting scar."

"Please tell us," prompted Nancy, "about that hole and the hickory pole."

Grandmother Stanton smoothed the waistcoat gently.

"It's a tale that goes back to Revolutionary Days. And it's the first time, to my knowledge, that a Hutchinson ever played the part of fool—remarkably well. Yet Ezra was a brave man. Now listen . . .

"Ezra Hutchinson was then a young captain in the militia. His uncle, Captain Nahum, brought in from many a foreign port chests of magnificent, imported folderols—satin knee-breeches, buckled shoes, gay-plumed hats, capes. And waistcoats! That was Ezra's main hobby. He collected as many waistcoats as you collect bumps and bruises, Beth—as Steven hoards up cravats. Such an array! All beautiful and costly.

"But he was a staunch Whig—like all the Hutchinsons. And when he was drilling his militia-men, he dropped his dandified clothes and wore plain homespun like his little squad . . . Little by little affairs grew decidedly awkward for the colonists. You know about it—high taxes and high-handed, British

appointed governors. Then came the affair of the Boston Tea Party, the Battle of Lexington and Concord, and all the stirring rest.

“Now, there lived in the great house on the hill, half a mile down the road, a family by the name of Morningside, recently come from England. They seemed wealthy, quiet folk, who kept much to themselves. Mr. Morningside was supposed to be a surveyor. He had one grown-up son who was away from home much, only coming back at odd times. This son's name was George, and his own calling was much of a mystery. But it came out later.

“When open trouble with England developed more than one whisper went about the countryside concerning these people. They were said to be staunch Tories, serving His Majesty secretly, and spying on all the movements of the colonists. But the Hutchinsons disliked to believe hearsay gossip. They refused to accredit the repeated, growing murmur against their next-door neighbors.

“The trouble became greater. Boston was running red with scarlet-jacketed, British troops. The colonists were up in arms. The militia drilled secretly every night behind the Town Hall in a little patch of woods—in Ezra's

little village outside Boston-town. Affairs were shaping rapidly.

“Late one night, Ezra was awakened by the sound of some one moving in the shrubs below the window. He got up in the dark room. Peering out from behind the heavy wooden shutters, he saw a pale flare of light which was snuffed instantly. As he watched, the light appeared again, nearer the house. He fancied he could discern a shadowy figure. Ezra tumbled hastily into his clothes. He crept down the stairs, unlatched the side door, and went out. But he could see no one.

“Then he heard a whisper from the heavy shadows of the bushes.

“I can’t find anything. They’re too clever to leave plans or messages about. *He* is awaiting us under the holly bush at the corner of the corn-field. We’ll separate and meet him there in ten minutes. You go north and I’ll go south. They’re asleep here.”

“Ezra pondered hastily. Who could the *he* be? Some secret messenger? Some spy? What did they want in his father’s house? All the musket and ball were safely hidden in an old well at the rear of the Town Hall, an old well whose top was covered over and hidden by a huge stone. All their arms and ammunition

were stored there, for they drilled with wooden dummies. Could it be that these prowlers had been searching the house under the mistaken notion that the arms and ammunition were hidden there?

"Young Ezra smiled grimly. His mind was made up in a flash. His father was in Boston. He was alone in the house with his mother and the help. Captain Hutchinson had refused him a commission with General Warren, chiefly because he disapproved of foppish waistcoats. He declared that a Hutchinson turned dude lacked real sand and sense. So Ezra had swallowed his chagrin and drilled his own, self-organized little company.

"Fortunately it was a pitch-black night. Ezra knew every twist and turn to that spot under the holly tree. But to reach it would mean following after the other two who already were ahead of him. He would be handicapped at the outset for hearing the first part of the secret meeting and whatever the mysterious *he* had to tell them. Ezra felt very sure that not a word must be lost.

"Now there was only one way to get there as soon as the other two. He would have to go straight across the ploughed and fully planted corn-field. It was the only certain short-cut.

It was dangerously open ground, for the young corn had just started. But the field ran straight to the rendezvous.

“Ezra set out in his stockinged feet, hiding his heavy boots under a stone in the wall. He crept through the patch of ground with its young shoots of early corn. It was so dark he could hardly see his hand before him. But he had an excellent sense of direction, for he had been much in the woods. And he knew every stick and stone of the fields. Once he lay flat between the rows of dirt. He fancied he heard a step in the darkness. His problem grew more hazardous every moment. For when he came to the end of the ploughed ground, full in the open space, there was the holly bush, guarded by at least three pairs of sharp eyes and ears. If he should make a single misstep, kick a stone or stumble, they would discover his presence at once.

“Ezra now crawled along, not daring to take an upright position. He was thankful for the darkness and his brown homespun suit.

“He was now within thirty feet of the spot where the two were to meet the mysterious third. But thirty feet was too great a distance to hear muffled whispers. He must get

closer, no matter what danger was involved. If only the corn were grown!

"He crept now with extreme caution. Every movement he made was vital on that soundless night in that open, unprotected space. If they should light a flare or a taper, nothing could save him from being discovered!

"His hands suddenly struck something damp and cold and yielding. For a moment Ezra's breath caught in his throat. He had touched clothing, empty, flapping clothing.

"Motionless he squatted on all fours waiting for the thing before him to make some further motion. But nothing happened. There came only a faint rustle in the underbrush beyond the clearing.

"Ezra put out an investigating hand slowly, cautiously. Still the thing stood there, rigid, upright. This time his exploring fingers struck a boot. But the boot was motionless, upright, embedded in the earth with the shoots of young corn about its feet. Emboldened by the silence, the lack of movement, Ezra discovered a second boot.

"Something struck him smartly in the nose. He fell down, all but making an exclamation.

“But it was only the flapping hem of a long cape.

“Then he knew! The boys in the militia had promised to rig up a dummy, an effigy to scare the crows, the starlings, and the jays away from the freshly sown seeds. The troublesome birds had nipped at the seeds and the young shoots.

“A scare-crow,” smiled Blunder-Beth. “Just like we have nowadays!”

The old lady nodded and went on:

“Ezra’s quick fingers soon discovered that the dummy that flapped there was still very completely garbed. Discarded knee-breeches, high, heavy, worn boots, waistcoat, cape and three-cornered hat dipped low at the top with the cape hunched high. It must have made a realistic figure there, except where the cross-poles stuck out beyond the cape and above the head. That plainly proclaimed it to be a dummy.

“Quickly Ezra stepped into the great boots, donned the clothes, pulled the hat low over his own face with the cape hunched high to conceal the fact that a living man had donned the clothes of a dummy. He took care that the cross-pole still projected stiffly beyond the cape, marking it instantly for an effigy, a fig-

ure presumably to scare the thieving birds. Then he took on a very stiff, wooden pose.

"He had scarcely assumed this disguise when he heard faint sounds in the darkness before him. The three prowlers had evidently met. He could now hear very distinctly.

" 'Darker than a pocket,' came one whisper.

" ' 'Tis that.'

" 'What news?'

"At this point Ezra heard a little sound behind him. His heart must have jumped in his throat. He must have leaned rigidly against both the upright and cross-pole, scarcely daring to breathe.

"The three spies under the bush heard the sound also. Came a sharp scratching of flint, a flicker of light, a sputter of flame as they ignited a taper. The light licked out the darkness around Ezra. It revealed the stiff figure there with its arms ending in pole-ends.

"A sharp whisper rasped, 'It's a fox—beyond the dummy on the poles. Egad! A silver fox! The pelt's worth a commission from His Majesty.'

One of the figures seemed to aim straight at Ezra as the boy cowered under the clothes on that pole. There was a flash, a boom, the pun-

gent smell of powder from a heavy old pistol which carried a single ball.

“The heavy pole in front of Ezra shook. The spy, a poor marksman, had sent his bullet ploughing straight against the cross-pole. It hit a knot—this very knot—and glanced off, passing sidewise through the waistcoat, out under Ezra’s extended arm, without so much as scratching him. The silver-gray fox fled safely, its life spared.

“In the silence Ezra heard, ‘You’re a fool, firing shot like that, even for a fox. Weightier matters press.’

“‘Oh, these rebels sleep. They know nothing. I missed the fox, but I jarred the old dummy—even as His Majesty’s troops will jar the rebellious spirits of these colonists!’

“Then they listened. But evidently the shot had gone unheard.

“At midnight, tomorrow night,’ a whisper stated, ‘we followers of His Majesty will assemble behind the Town Hall. I have it on secret authority that the rebels have hidden a goodly supply of ammunition and arms in an ancient well which lies hidden under a flat stone there. We will appropriate these . . . Furthermore, in the shed of Elder Burlingtop, in a knot-hole above the door, are hidden all

the plans and charts of high import. I will commission you, Morningside, to go there with all speed at nightfall tomorrow. We will meet here again afterwards.'

"After further low whispers, they went away.

"Ezra waited until he was certain they had left. His fingers fluttered over the waistcoat, finding the hole of the bullet that had missed him so narrowly, thanks to this sturdy hickory pole and the deflecting knot in it. He smiled boyishly as his fingers recognized one of his own fine waistcoats, a bit shabbier than the others, and hence high-handedly discarded. The boys had evidently taken it as a joke on him to deck an effigy and to have it stand guard over a corn-field. But from that moment it became something more to Ezra than a forlorn and faded waistcoat. It was a permanent reminder of how closely he had stood to death. And the old hickory pole had served as a crude coat-of-mail that had saved him just as surely as armored plate would have done.

"Before daybreak, Ezra, aided by his militia-men, secretly and silently removed all stores, plans and ammunition to a new and safer hiding-spot. Later they caught the two Morningsides, father and son, along with the

British regular. Young Ezra, himself, accompanied the three captives to Boston where he joined his father. There, to Ezra's delight, he was given a full commission because of the service he had rendered. And he served well through many other daring exploits.

"As for the waistcoat, it was the only one of Ezra's beautiful collection that he afterwards prized. The plain continental uniform had completely cured him of his foppish hobby."



IV

TIM'S TARPAULIN GHOST

Steven looked up from the road-map he had been studying.

"In a week," he told his cousin David, "we'll take the car and go on that camping trip out in the country."

"Where're you going?" demanded Blunder-Beth.

"Going to trek into the woods behind Black Lake."

Grandmother Stanton looked up from her knitting.

"If you're in the vicinity of Black Lake, you'll still see the stone masonry on the old haunted house. The building itself has since been razed."

The boys glanced at her quickly.

"What's the story?" demanded Steven. "We'll look the place over."

"Beth," suggested their grandmother, "won't you run up to the old chest in the garret? There's something sewed into some canvas there—old yellow canvas. Just bring it down, please. There's a real ghost story tied inside that sewed-up canvas."

Beth skipped back in record-time, triumphantly displaying the old canvas. It was sewed up on two sides. David neatly severed the stitches with his jack-knife.

A heavy, stiff canvas hat, slightly resembling a fireman's helmet, came to view.

"It's a tarpaulin, the stiff waterproof head-gear at one time affected by sea-faring men. It's been largely displaced by the modern sou'wester . . . I'll tell you the story of Tim's Tarpaulin Ghost."

"Who was Tim?" inquired Nancy eagerly.

"Timothy Sheldon was an able-bodied seaman on the old *Silver Spray* under command of Capt. Nahum Hutchinson, your great-great-grandfather. Now this Timothy was a brawny giant of a fellow, six feet two, with a barrel chest and fists like a prize-fighter. But for all his size and strength, he never could be coaxed, harassed, or tantalized into any type of quarrel. He refused to fight or to be embroiled in one. So his shipmates on the *Silver Spray* foolishly called him Timid Tim. Even that didn't distress him. He seemed a great hulk of a man, as gentle as a rabbit. Then his shipmates tried bullying him, 'ragging him on,' as you boys say. But Tim held his temper. He merely smiled indifferently and ignored

their efforts. In fact, trying to stir up Timid Tim soon turned into tame sport.

“Now Capt. Nahum had just docked the *Silver Spray* with a heavy cargo of coffee and spices from South America. He gave his men shore leave. They hadn't been on land an hour before they learned of the mysterious ghost at Black Lake. The year before, a ship carpenter had gone trapping in the section around the abandoned, old farm-house. He took up temporary headquarters in the empty dwelling. Later he disappeared completely. He was never heard of from that day to this, although his traps had captured half a dozen excellent specimens. And the pelts were worth a good sum even for an able ship carpenter. The ship carpenters organized a search. They combed the woods thereabouts. Several famous guides and trappers helped them. But it was to no avail. William Faraday, the missing man, had vanished as completely as if he'd been buried at sea. People roundabouts did not soon forget the occurrence. Henceforth they began to shun the abandoned, questionable, old farm-house. The vanished ship carpenter had been popular among the men. He wasn't known to have an enemy. This made the disappearance seem all the more ominous

and sinister. Whispers that the house was haunted only strengthened the mystery.

“One night, some villager became lost in the woods. Instead of regaining his bearings, he came out quite unexpectedly by the haunted farm-house where William Faraday had disappeared. There was a full moon. It tinselled the weather-beaten, old homestead with silver. Everything stood out as clear as if the first frost had fallen. The villager didn’t relish the mis-turn he had made, recalling all the contradictory, unsavory tales about the house. So he started to hurry by the silent, deserted, old place. As he came opposite an uncurtained window in the great kitchen at the rear, a shutter snapped suddenly, as if flung by unseen fingers. Later he declared that there wasn’t even a breath of wind stirring. Startled at the sudden sound, he glanced towards the dark window. The moonlight piped the sashes with white. But he saw something besides moonlight in that old window.”

Blunder-Beth leaned forward so anxiously that she lost her balance. She fell with a loud bump onto the floor. But none of them noted her. Their eyes were centered on Grandmother Stanton. Their minds beheld that deserted, brooding old house, the black window, limned out in moonlight.

“As he looked,” she continued, “he saw something white. He uttered a loud exclamation, he was so startled. Inside that dark window he discerned a skeleton! It moved, ever so slightly. Then he fled, temporarily routed of his senses. He told everyone that he’d seen Faraday’s ghost—that the old place was surely haunted. A few nights later some bold spirit hid there to verify the story of the skeleton in the window. This second man returned, even more emphatic than the first. Vividly he told of the bleached skeleton that lurked inside that kitchen—a skeleton which stood out as white as if it had been holystoned. Some of the jests and the skepticism began to ebb away. Three of the most hard-headed doubters volunteered to go together. They declared that they would later enter the house, search it from foundation to garret to find what was lurking inside. Of course the other two men had fled, without trying to follow up what they declared they’d seen.”

David was fingering the stout tarpaulin brim.

“My!” he exclaimed. “It’s stiff and sharp!”

Grandmother Stanton smiled. “Bear that in mind, how stiff and sharp the brim of that tarpaulin is! For that’s where Tim comes

into the story—later . . . The three villagers went on the first night that the moon was scheduled by the almanac to be full. They hid in the bushes, watching the moonlight mount up the side of the house until the kitchen windows lay bathed in revealing, silver light. Then, promptly at midnight, a dead-white skeleton appeared to quiver and vibrate in the darkness behind the window.

“The three men dashed out from their hiding-spots. Two entered the kitchen by the rear door, one by the side entrance. The old place had never been locked. They struck lights. They stared about them, around the damp, dilapidated flooring, at the yawning, blackened fireplace, at the forlorn emptiness of the room. Dust and neglect lay heavy everywhere. There wasn't anything as big as a mouse inside. They hurried through the house. They found nothing—not a thing to account for the skeleton all three of them had plainly seen a short time before. They re-entered the kitchen. They must have talked together in low whispers. They examined the window through which the phantom had been seen. Dust lay there heavily. Even the old floor was sagged and warped and broken in many places. The huge wooden shutters moaned and creaked with many of

the swivels missing. Three of the windows carried frayed old strings which drooped from the tattered shades, wound about the rollers at the tops of the windows. The other windows were bare of shades.

“They searched the cellar again. It had a hard dirt bottom. The great stones of the wall showed little mortar. It had cracked, and fallen out with the passing of time and from neglect. The stones sagged unevenly. But there was nothing there to excite suspicion. The bare, hard dirt showed no sign of boot-marks, although a skeleton could scarcely be expected to leave foot-prints behind. Completely baffled, they returned to their homes. They could not explain what they’d seen. People now shunned the place more than ever. They felt that something evil was afoot there, that some unknown danger lurked about. The house lay close to Black Lake, a body of water, half-fresh and half-salt, which emptied into the ocean by a narrow channel.”

“I think I know what the danger was!” exclaimed Blunder-Beth. “Let me take your pencil, David, and a page out of your notebook. I’ll write down my guess and show it to you when Grandmother has explained the riddle and how Timid Tim laid the ghost.”

Beth scribbled one word on the bit of paper. Tantalizingly she doubled it up in her palm.

The old lady continued, "Then a retired sea-captain who doted on phantoms and ghosts offered a reward of twenty dollars to whosoever should either lay the ghost or explain its presence. Other useless investigations followed. One man even fired straight through the skeleton, breaking a pane of glass. But the phantom had merely continued to mock him—finally disappearing with a long wail. Other aspirants for the reward declared that they saw nothing, no sign of a spectral skeleton. So these contradictory reports from equally dependable investigators only deepened the mystery surrounding the haunted house.

"This was the situation when Timid Tim came ashore from the *Silver Spray*. The reward was posted outside the tavern door. Tim read it, lurching there in his heavy boots as if he still felt the roll of a deck under his feet. One of his mates taunted him. 'Say, Tim, been't yer going to nab that ther' ghost? Jes' fetch 'im a wallop wid one o' them helfy hams of yourn. Say, that ther' ghost 'ud die o' fright, jes' a-lampin' a look o' yer, Tim.' And so on—

“Tim didn’t answer—then. He was thinking deeply. After a bit he grunted and said, ‘Mebbe I kin, and mebbe I kaint. I’ll ’low for to try.’ Then he strode off into the woods, although it was high noon. He searched Black Lake and the woods roundabout to test out some theory he was forming. Then he went into the cellar and spent some time there. When he emerged his clothes were covered with dust and dampness. But there was a grim smile on his lips. Anyone seeing him then would hardly have called him Timid Tim. He looked like some young gladiator about to enter the arena.”

“Was he armed?” demanded Nancy.

“No, except for his own strength and courage.”

“Funny idea, running into unknown dangers like that, without any weapons,” objected Steven.

“Captain Hutchinson didn’t send his men ashore armed. Handy weapons are dangerous associates for idle sailors ashore and looking for a rollicking time. Many of them are too hot-headed to be entrusted with arms. So Timothy was bound by the captain’s orders. . . As darkness approached, he took his position in a thick clump of evergreens not ten feet

from the window. He told Capt. Nahum afterwards that he hadn't a ghost of a notion in his head about what he'd do when he saw the ghost. But he was confident that when the apparition appeared he'd come by some inspiration.

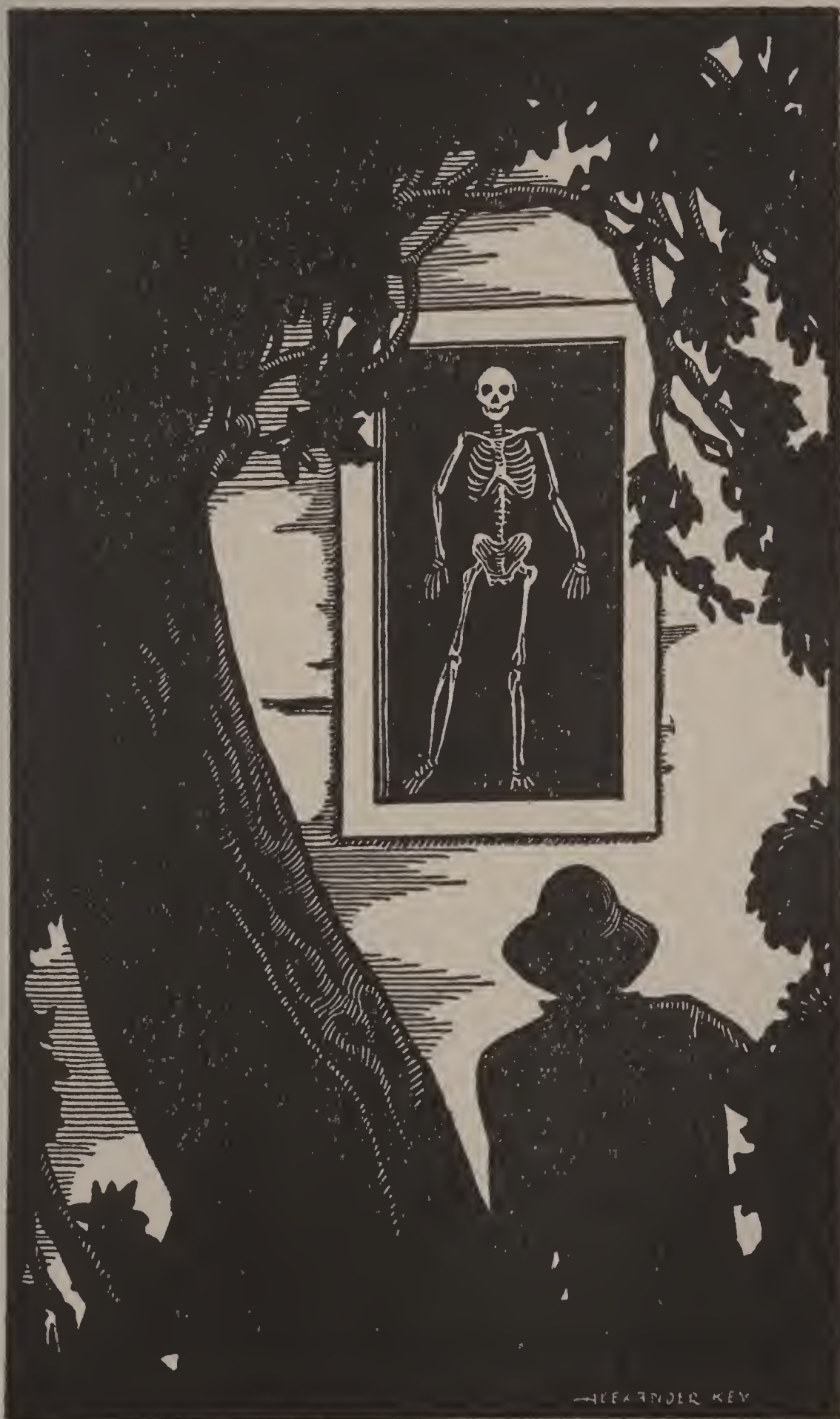
“So he waited, while the hours ticked by. Darkness fell. The house was lighted up faintly by a crescent moon. But the night was vividly starlit. The black window stared at him, glimmering eerily. As midnight approached, Tim sat in strained attention. One thing was clear. *He* wouldn't make the mistake of running into the kitchen to look for the phantom. He'd drop into the cellar by the nearest open window. At midnight he fancied he heard a faint sound inside the old house. He must have bent forward, every nerve strung tight, a huge hulk of brawn and muscle. As he looked he saw something white flicker inside. It seemed to move slowly, but surely. He stared until his eyeballs must have hurt him. He saw plainly the ghostly form of a marble-pale skeleton swaying inside that old window.

“Then Tim's fingers flashed to the stiff, broad brim of his tarpaulin. He yanked the covering from his head. His powerful arm

shot out. He hurled the tarpaulin straight as a dart through the middle pane. There was a sharp splinter of glass as the hat hurtled through. By now Tim had ducked through the sizable, low window into the cellar. The sound of the shattered glass would fool any skulker into thinking that Tim had gone into the kitchen like all the others.

“Tim had left his heavy boots in the evergreens. He dropped in his stockinged feet onto the hard cellar bottom. His ears were very keen. And he knew instantly that something moved in the darkness there along the opposite wall. Then he heard a faint scratching. He crept nearer. He knew some one was trying to flee by one of the low windows. He had fixed firmly in his mind the position of all of them. His ears told him that whoever moved there was attempting to crawl out the second window from the bulkhead into the underbrush.

“With a powerful movement Timid Tim reached out. His great fingers closed on a dark shape that wiggled and writhed. The contest was brief. With the tarred rope from his pockets Tim securely lashed his captive. Upon bearing him out into the open he found he had captured a swarthy foreigner. The



HE SAW PLAINLY THE GHOSTLY FORM OF A SKELETON

fellow sputtered incoherently. Tim took him, trussed as he was, and gagged him. For he was afraid that the fellow would signal to others. Then Tim hid him in the bushes, safe from sight.

“He now returned to the kitchen for his tarpaulin that he had flung through the glass, and presumably through the skeleton that a bullet could not harm. There Tim found that he had really captured a ghost with his sharp tarpaulin.”

“I don’t understand—” began Blunder-Beth.

Nancy quickly silenced her.

“Tim’s tarpaulin had crashed through the window pane, thereby expending much of its force. It also smashed through something else. It went through the ghost and hooked it.”

“How?” they all demanded.

“Tim found his tarpaulin caught in an old black window-shade, where it had slit a gash. The hat had been caught and stopped by its crown. On that black window-shade, as it lay completely unrolled with the tarpaulin holding it down, was painted in white a crude, but rather realistic figure of a skeleton. Moreover, the string on the shade was long enough for some one lurking in the cellar beneath with

the end in his hand, to pull down the shade with the rope threaded through one of the breaks in the old flooring."

Blunder-Beth clapped her hands. "Oh, I know. Just like Black Art. Only the painted white skeleton stood out against the black shade in the dark kitchen—"

"And," went on David excitedly, "when the fluttering curtain had been pulled down for a few moments, the fellow under the break in the floor merely let go the string and the shade rolled up with a snap, with the skeleton completely hidden on what looked like a common, rolled-up curtain in the old kitchen. That explains why a bullet couldn't hurt it—also the fancied wail."

"That's it exactly," agreed their grandmother. "And the fellow in the cellar merely crawled out to safety before a search was under way."

"Who did it and why?" asked Nancy.

"It all came out later. The foreigner confessed. He was one of a band of smugglers—"

With triumphant eyes Beth held up her scrap of paper for all to read. On it she had written in a big, scrawling hand one word, "*Smugglers.*"

She made a playful face at Steven. "That's one time I didn't blunder!"

Steven laughed back through his heavy rimmed spectacles. "But you did. You blundered into the truth!"

"These smugglers," resumed their grandmother, "put ashore through the narrow channel connecting the sea with Black Lake. They landed their illegal cargo in the darkness, and concealed it under the stones in the cellar wall. Tim had unearthed a pretty cache as he had searched that afternoon. The smugglers had heard, in some way, of William Faraday's strange disappearance. They declared that they knew nothing of the occurrence, and nothing could ever be proved against them on that score. One of the band hit upon the bright idea of making the place seem haunted by Faraday's ghost. So the crude skeleton was painted and played for the benefit of any who ventured near the smugglers' hiding-place. They hoped, by haunting the house, to keep everyone away."

"So," breathed Blunder-Beth, "Tim got the reward for laying the ghost."

"Yes," nodded their grandmother. "And they no longer called him Timid Tim. They named him Tarpaulin Tim, because of the ghost he had brought to earth by the sturdy old canvas hat."

V

BROWN DUST

Blunder-Beth wagged her head sagely. With mock seriousness she frowned into the dark old chest under the creaking eaves.

“You can never tell,” she affirmed, “by the outside of a package what’s inside it.”

“Unless it’s alive,” objected Steven, “has claws, and can growl.”

From beneath an embossed scabbard Blunder-Beth picked up a tarnished silver box. It was round; an elaborate coat-of-arms had once been etched on it. But time had blurred its outlines to mere surface scratches.

Beth shook the box vigorously, holding it near her ear.

Then she began to sneeze. She sneezed until the tears ran down her round face. Her stubby nose took on a carnelian hue.

“It’s evidently something to be sneezed at,” remarked Steven facetiously. “Whatever’s the matter, Beth? What have you blundered into—now?”

“*Kerchoo!*” he ended abruptly.

He sneezed six times in succession.

Nancy backed away from them, laughing. "It seems to be catching."

They hurried down the stairs after her.

Grandmother Stanton emerged from the sewing-room. She glanced at the three, Beth and Steven red of eyes and nose.

"Whatever—" she began.

"It's this little old box," Blunder-Beth explained, shaking it defiantly.

A fresh paroxysm of sneezing seized her.

"You might call it an early time form of tear-gas," Grandmother Stanton mused, "with none of its dangerous qualities. Come into my room and I'll tell you about that silver box before I water my plants."

They followed her into the snug little room. She wiped her spectacles. The round silver box rested at a safe distance on her sewing-table.

Soon she took off the cover. The three peeked inside.

"Why, it's nothing but brown dust!" exclaimed Blunder-Beth disappointedly, scratching at her nose which still persisted in tickling.

"Huh!" offered Steven. "I know what it is. Snuff!"

"Gracious!" jested Beth. "What a disagreeable habit for a Hutchinson!"

She stared primly down her nose at her grandmother. There was laughter in her brown eyes. For their ancestors were a fetish with the old lady. She never tired of talking of their early exploits; of their sterling, intrepid adventures on sea and land.

She now looked up smiling.

“Habits are peculiar things,” she reminded them. “Just like ridiculous fashions. People then, as now, followed the prevalent style like so many sheep. General Washington, the Marquis de Lafayette, and many distinguished folk of the day took snuff—just as people nowadays powder the *outside* of their noses, rather than the inside.”

Impishly Blunder-Beth squinted down her nose at a single freckle on its end. Then she gave a quick glance at Nancy.

Nancy flushed. Instinctively her own hand went up to her nose.

“That’s a touchdown!” recognized Steven. “The first half goes to grandmother!”

“Well,” protested Nancy mildly. “That was such a horrid—such a disgusting habit, wasn’t it?”

“But I’m not defending the habit,” declared their grandmother, frankly. “We can’t banish facts because we disapprove of them. And

I'm certain the custom soon went out of style . . . But this snuff-box holds a story—or rather its brown dust does. It once belonged to Capt. Nahum Hutchinson. It sailed with him on the *Silver Spray* in many a strange port. It walked the bridge with him by night, under the stars, when the heavens were his only road-map for finding the right lane through strange seas."

"My!" exclaimed Steven. "I wouldn't want to drive the car by aid of the stars alone!"

"Nahum grew to prize it highly, as one does any old, familiar thing that has been close to one through many strange adventures. The way he came into possession of it was like this:

"One time he came ashore after a tedious voyage around the Horn. The present captain was just recovering from a touch of yellow fever. He had been desperately ill. Nahum, then a young fellow, was first mate. He assumed command and brought the *Silver Spray* safely to dock. The captain's name was Benjamin Alden. He thought a lot of young Nahum, admired him—knew that he would develop into an able skipper. But the young man was modest, very modest. The moment he had docked the *Silver Spray*, young Nahum

went ashore. He didn't even wait for Capt. Alden's thanks, accompanied by his gruff, brief words of commendation. The captain wanted to give him something that he prized. And Nahum had always seemed to admire the silver snuff-box."

"Huh! Did the fellows take snuff then, too?" asked Steven scornfully.

"I imagine so. But, if they did, it meant no more to them than drinking coffee does nowadays. It was merely a passing fad. We may consider it with amusement and tolerance, just as we recall buckled knee-breeches, embroidered waistcoats—

"And long hair all curled and braided and dolled up with a ribbon," added Steven for full measure.

She nodded. "So Capt. Alden had hardly returned home before he commissioned his son Ezra to take the silver snuff-box as a slight token of his father's esteem to Nahum Hutchinson for bringing the *Silver Spray* safely to anchor. Ezra Alden was then about sixteen. His people lived in a little cabin in a rugged, untraversed locality in the deep woods. It was at least ten miles from the port. Captain Alden kept only one saddle-horse. One of his men had traveled inland on important busi-

ness, with horse and saddle-bags heavily packed. That left young Ezra no alternative except to walk through the deep woods to Nahum's home, carrying the silver snuff-box. A walk like that meant little then. You know," Grandmother Stanton smiled down on Steven, "they didn't depend upon the motor to whisk them everywhere—"

Steven smiled back broadly.

"My, what a lot they missed, didn't they, grandmother!"

"In time, yes. In health, no."

Blunder-Beth stirred uneasily. She wanted the story. And she didn't wish Grandmother Stanton to read them a lecture on their laziness—just then. The tarnished snuff-box looked too intriguing.

"Never mind," laughed their grandmother. "The motor car's a great help to old folk like me. Don't know what I'd do without yours, Steven. And you're a very skilful pilot."

Steven made her a low bow.

"I'm running true to form then. It seems to me I've heard somewhere that there were many captains and pilots and other titled personages among those ancient and honorable Hutchinsons."

She laughed at his raillery, and continued:

“Ezra set out with a knapsack strapped to his shoulders. It carried a bite of food—pungent smoked ham and hardtack. In his belt he wore an old horse-pistol.”

“Only one ball in a pistol!” objected Steven. “It must have been a slow task crowding down the load after the discharge. Suppose he ran into a pack of wolves! There wouldn’t be much left of him after he had fired one shot.”

“There weren’t wolves in that vicinity then. They frequented a section farther north. There were bob-cats and bears aplenty—but no wolves.”

“Well, a pistol was better than nothing,” decided Beth.

“He started shortly after noon. He could make the trip easily before nightfall. He would spend the night with Nahum. Perhaps they would go on a trip for eels. And they would have a jolly time . . . In some way Ezra lost the trail. I don’t remember how. But he was a good woodsman. So, after a time he came back into that narrow, overgrown footpath. But it was much later than he had planned upon. Dusk had already begun to fall. It drops swiftly in the deep woods, where the trees make a dark canopy overhead, blotting out the very sky. In crawling through a

thick clump of underbrush he had lost his pistol. He had noted its absence too late. He wouldn't go back. That would be foolhardy.

"So he started out again, quite unarmed this time; nibbling a bite of fragrant ham and some hardtack. The woods grew thicker and thicker. The path became a mere thread in the gathering dusk, a snuff-colored thread. He had yet three miles to travel before coming to the Hutchinson homestead. But Ezra strode along, taking care to cling to the dim trail. The heavy underbrush must have scratched at his clothing, must have slapped at his shoulders. Full darkness had now fallen. It was a very narrow trail and used only as a short cut when the cart-path was not followed.

"Once Ezra fancied he heard a sound. He stopped and listened. But the true location of sound is difficult to place in deep, dark woods. Now it seemed to come from behind him; now from a thick clump of bushes opposite a huge hollow pine-tree, which he and Nahum knew well. They had once hived a swarm of bees there, and removed some twenty pounds of honey. He wondered if the bees still loaded their sweets in the gaunt, crooked, hollow trunk. A faint moon brought out the

gnarled outline of the sprawling old ever-green."

She paused; her eyes looked as excited as a girl's.

"But it revealed something else, directly in front of him. Two balls of fire glittered there in the darkness. They seemed to be motionless, to stand still, in midair, some three feet from the ground. Then they vanished like some will-o'-the-wisp. Ezra knew what they signified. Some wild beast had prowled there, his eyes gleaming through the darkness. The size of those glowing balls of fire, their distance above the ground told him that a black bear blocked the path ahead. Bruin must have sniffed out his presence from the remaining strips of ham in his knapsack. Bears were seldom ugly except when ravenous for food—or cornered—or hurt.

"Ezra paused abruptly. The fiery eyes appeared again. This time they gleamed nearer and closer to the ground. Hungry Bruin was walking up on all-fours to meet this moving thing laden with the enticing smell. A low growl followed. Ezra reached down hurriedly. He felt about on the rough trail for a club, a branch or a stone—something he could use in

warding off a possible attack. But there was nothing. The path lay bare of underbrush.

“The bear came nearer, the scent of the ham hurrying its clumsy feet. Ezra pulled out the meat. He flung it straight at the yellow eyes. Came another low growl, a swishing in the dark—a faint, crunching sound. The bear was eating the meat. . . . Now, Ezra had competed in many a jumping contest. He was an adept at what you call the Running Broad, Steven. So, while Bruin nuzzled the scraps of smoked ham, Ezra made a tremendous leap over the bear’s back. He cleared the creature, but dug a heel smartly into its side as he went over. In the darkness he had miscalculated the distance.

“The bear roared with surprise and anger. Something swished through the air. There was a tearing of cloth. Bruin’s forepaw had clutched a shred from Ezra’s coat, barely grazing his arm. The bear set after him in aroused pursuit.

“The boy leaped nimbly for the rim of the hole in the old hollow tree. He swayed there, barely finding toe-space. The rotten wood began to give way. A loud *crack* sounded. Ezra plunged feet first into the heart of the hollow trunk. As he slid into the dark in-

terior, a cloud of dust and spongy bits of rotten wood rattled down. He wondered if an angry army of honey-bees would boil up like a cloud of steam. He would then be between two lively fires—enraged bees and a savage bear!

“But no angry, humming protest came from inside; no seething swarm of incensed insects poured forth. That was lucky. But Bruin was still coming on, mad to the heart from the blow he had received. And he was ravenous for more ham. The scraps had been a mere tantalizing tidbit to arouse his hunger. His muzzle was in the air. Ezra had dropped his knapsack when he had leaped over Bruin. The bear had sniffed at it; torn it to bits, where the scent of ham still slung; and plunged on after the boy.

“Ezra considered himself trapped. Unless— But he didn’t relish a close-up encounter with a thoroughly aroused and ravenous bear. He was wedged too tightly into the hollow trunk to defend himself well. He attempted to climb up. But the sides were too slick. Bits of rotten wood again filtered down. He put his hands on the edge of the hole—hoping to vault out and give Bruin a run—for bears are clumsy pursuers. But the rotten

tree gave way, only enlarging the aperture. Ezra was certainly caught in an unpleasant predicament. Once more he tried to find toe-space. He might beat the bear up the tree. As he strained about, something thudded softly to the ground inside. Instinctively Ezra grasped after it. Luck was with him, for the first time. He found it at once——”

“The silver snuff-box,” breathed Blunder-Beth, her eyes wide with excitement.

“The silver snuff-box,” repeated their grandmother. “Quicker than it takes to tell, Ezra seized it and pulled off the tightly fitting cover. He flung the entire contents, the whole box of strong snuff, straight in Bruin’s upturned muzzle—full into the bear’s eyes and nose.

“Bruin paused, reared, pawed desperately at his muzzle. Then came a series of snuffs and sneezes and grunts. The bear got down and rolled over and over, pawing at his nose and eyes. He roared with surprise and pain. Ezra had now made toe-space within the dried, decayed old trunk. He clambered out, and hastily retreated down the path. He reached the Hutchinson homestead without further mishap.

“He and Nahum then returned, armed with

muskets and tarred rope. They found Bruin still roaming about, blindly crashing in the bushes and digging at his muzzle. Nahum flung a lasso over him and captured him alive. When they had him firmly lashed to a stake behind the Hutchinson house, they poured lav- ing buckets of cold water over his head. In time the smarting left. Bruin was later sold. . . . So, for once, a few ounces of this self- same, distasteful brown dust played a promi- nent, valiant part in saving the day for young Ezra Alden. Only the snuff-box stood between him and an enraged bear!"



VI

SAID WITH SPEARS

“The sun edged up, like a pallid pearl, beyond the splendor of the sea. Palm fronds clacked in the wind, like the rattle of castanets, or the hollow beat of drums. . . . This was the setting on one momentous day far from the beaten trails,” murmured Grandma Stanton with dreamy, reminiscent eyes.

“Sounds like *On the Road to Mandalay*,” appraised Steven, peering through his heavy-rimmed spectacles. “There’s something about these queer, foreign parts that captivates a fellow’s interest. I’m going to travel——”

Blunder-Beth came romping in. She brandished a long spear. Its point was rusty metal, its shaft bamboo, much notched and gnarled. On its flaring end glowered five irregular, empty holes—a few inches apart.

“What’re these holes, grandmother?” Beth asked, holding the end of the shaft under her chin and running her fingers down as if she played a violin.

“I’ll allow each of you an opportunity to guess. Now, Beth, put on your thinking-cap.”

Blunder-Beth frowned with mock concern. She wrinkled the end of her stubby nose.

“I should say that the holes might equalize the weight of the spear, so the Malays could throw it more truly.”

“Not bad, but that’s not the answer. Next, Nancy——”

“Something to do with appeasing their gods, maybe. Some kink in their beliefs, to ward off evil spirits.

“Good! But not quite right. Now, Steven, the honors are abandoned to you.”

“I’ve heard of singing spears,” mused Steven, “among some savage tribes. Were there pegs in these holes fastening thin strips of bamboo strung between, so that when they were flung they made a long, humming wail to confound their enemies?”

“That answer shows the most ingenuity. But all of you are wrong.”

“What was it then?” they chorused.

“Ah, that’s the story,” she tantalized them.

They waited, for she would tell the tale in her own good time.

“Was it about Capt. Nahum, as usual?” asked the incorrigible Blunder-Beth. “Seems to me he fell into more adventures than Robinson Crusoe!”

"He did. This is a spear he captured on one dangerous occasion. . . .

"At one time Nahum's father was stationed on a little, out-of-the-way island in the Malay Straits. He was a scientist, you know. He was then making a splendid collection of the insect life there. Nahum's mother was dead. So the boy traveled everywhere with his father, becoming a veritable globe-trotter at a tender age. Now, this little speck of an island was like a great spore off the Malay Straits. It didn't even own a name then. And I'm not quite certain now which one it was. But it doesn't matter. They're much alike."

"Were there cannibals there?" asked Beth, wide-eyed.

"Cannibalism was a common custom among the Malays then. But Mr. Hutchinson dropped anchor inside a little coral atoll. They lived in the little ketch-rigged ship which he had equipped especially for the expedition. In the stern lay a couple of ten-pounders, sturdy little cannon for those days, and distinctly superior to the native spear and kris. Malay weapons were effective only at close range. In addition, *The North Star* was equipped with fowling-pieces and pistols aplenty, as well as an ugly assortment of cut-

lasses. Mr. Hutchinson was risking no haphazard encounter with the Malays. There were also many boxes of gunpowder. The savages little liked the flash and boom of this unknown monster, which the men with skins like pearls employed. They feared the white man's god.

“So Mr. Hutchinson considered there was little danger in the expedition. They set port and starboard watches night and day. No swarm of proas could surprise them in the dark. Nor did the natives attempt an attack. A few warning booms from the cannon and several impressive displays of the power of gunpowder held them at an awed and safe distance. Mr. Hutchinson's party went ashore in full daylight, keeping away from the jungle as much as possible. And he always took along a half-dozen men, armed to the teeth, as they used to say. The savages feared those dark sticks, straighter than the bamboo, which belched fire, fury and swift death, if the white man were molested. Those milk-faced men worshiped strange gods, who guarded them with fiery strength, quite beyond the puny power of kris, spear, and poison darts. . . . The little expedition prospered. Many rare specimens went aboard daily.

“One night the first mate, a young fellow named Peter Graham, came to Mr. Hutchinson. The sea glimmered like a sheet of dark enamel illuminated with flecks of molten silver—the reflected stars. The moon crept upward until it lay like a bright doubloon on the beaded sky. Inland, the shadowy shapes of palms cut the heavens like huge feather-dusters. The muffled chirrup of night-birds could be heard, accompanied by the *lap-lap* of unruly waves as they licked against the dark-colored rocks near the shore.”

“I can picture it, grandmother. Just like a painted scene,” murmured Nancy dreamily.

“It must have appeared more like a picture than reality, it was so silent and strange. . . . Peter, the first mate, appeared very eager. He was a tall, straight young fellow, probably twenty or so. And he was a great favorite with young Nahum, who was then perhaps about seventeen.

“‘Mr. Hutchinson,’ he said, ‘I’ve been trying to muster up courage to come to you for quite a while—ever since we’ve anchored here, in fact. But I’ve been afraid you’d laugh at me.’

“Mr. Hutchinson looked at him sympathetically. ‘I never laugh at a fellow’s sincerity,’

he encouraged. 'What's on your mind, Peter? Out with it!'

" 'It sounds silly, sir,' demurred Peter. 'Too improbable to repeat. But I can't get it out of my mind—especially since I've seen this weird island. Anything might happen here, sir. It's topsy-turvy land.'

"Mr. Hutchinson smiled. 'The spirit of the East is in your blood,' he recognized. 'You're half Malay yourself, Peter.' His eyes studied the brown, young face before him.

" 'It's like this, sir,' continued Peter, enheartened by the words. 'I met a fellow in Bangkok, one I had once looked after when he was sick. He was ashore, on leave from a pearling expedition. Yonder!' Peter jerked his thumb towards the north star. 'You know how sea-faring men yarn. Well, when my matey heard that I was shipping here with you, sir, he came and told me, straight out. "Pete Graham," he said, "you've done me a good turn, and now I'll do you one. Queer you should be going there. 'A mate of mine told me the story before he died of the fever. There's pearls on that island, pink pearls, as big as peas. They're perfect in skin, texture and coloring. They're located inside a little

crescent inlet on the north end of the island. You can't miss the place. They're salted thicker'n pebbles there. And they're worth a long sight more than bugs——” I beg your pardon, sir,’ Peter apologized to Mr. Hutchinson, ‘but you know how seamen consider science——’

“The scientist only smiled. ‘I know, Peter. But what’s your idea about this possible cache of pearls?’

“‘I don’t want to pass them up, sir,’ answered Peter earnestly. ‘Nahum and I have spent many hours practicing water-stunts, diving, holding our breath under water——’ ”

“‘They didn’t have any divers’ suits then,’ recalled Steven. “That complicated under-sea feats.”

“Yes,” she agreed.

“Peter went on, ‘I wonder if you could spare us a day to discover if there’s anything behind this treasure story. Oh, I know that lots of them peter out to nothing but talk, that some one else may have taken them already. But I wish, sir, you’d give Nahum and me your permission to spend a day diving in the little crescent lagoon. We could place half a dozen men on guard, well armed. If

the Malays turn ugly because they know of the pearls, we could easily drive them off. And we might reap a valuable reward.'

"Mr. Hutchinson stared out across the black sea to the forbidding darkness of the jungle. Peter's earnestness impressed him. It might be—— After a bit he decided, 'I'll arrange for it, day after tomorrow. We'll go ashore at dawn, making the little inlet from the sea. I'll take two boat-loads of men. We'll leave only two on board. But the ketch is heavily protected. The little ten-pounders could easily rake the waters roundabout, if the Malays should try to rush her in our absence. Besides, they have no way of knowing how large a crew I have. I would not permit the exploit for a moment, if I believed there would be any danger. I would not risk you boys and my men for a king's ransom. But at any rate, it should prove an exhilarating change for you, an adventuresome holiday. I confess to a hankering after treasure-hunting myself. Not that I ever discovered any,' he ended ruefully.

" 'Thank you, sir,' laughed Peter happily. 'With your permission, I'll tell Nahum before I go on watch.'

" 'He's in the cabin,' suggested Mr. Hutch-

inson. 'Tell him by all means. I know him. He'll be as eager as you.'

"Peter vanished. For a long time the scientist sat staring at the torn and ragged outlines of the jungle, as it lay like a black silhouette, smudging out the stars behind it.

* * * * *

"They lay on their oars above the black waters in the little, scimitar-shaped inlet Peter's friend had described. There was no mistaking it. It was the only one that cut a crescent into the basalt, on the north of the little island. The waters were unusually black, undoubtedly due to some mineral action brought about by the rocks. 'Volcanic,' Mr. Hutchinson had said directly on beholding the rock formation of the island. 'Must have been a lively place at some remote time. May become active again.'

"The scientist, Peter, Nahum and two of the crew occupied one boat. There were five men in the other—five of the crew. Every man carried musket, pistol, cutlass, powder and ball aplenty. They had, moreover, agreed on a signal. Three shots fired in rapid succession meant '*Help.*' If some unforeseen danger developed, and three reports were heard, *The North Star* was to put with all

speed to the northern end of the island, with her cannon ready. Mr. Hutchinson was a cautious man. He believed in preparedness.

“Peter and Nahum were to take turns in diving down into the dark waters near the cliffs. They were to go down cautiously, against the chance of striking rocks. At first they were to reconnoiter under water only the shortest possible time, getting their bearings and the character of the rocks, whether there were pearl-bearing bivalves clinging there——”

“What about octopi?” put in Steven, “and cuttle-fish? Aren’t the waters around tropic islands likely to be full of them?”

“Not always. There were none there, as Mr. Hutchinson’s repeated tests had proved.”

“And s-s-sh-sharks?” stuttered Blunder-Beth, as she sometimes did, when unduly excited.

“There weren’t sharks either. . . .

“Peter went down first. He was gone for a matter of seconds. His face was exultant. ‘There’re shells there,’ he reported, ‘and they aren’t empty. They’re pearl mussels, I’m sure.’

“Nahum dipped over the bow, out of sight in the dark waters. He was gone ten seconds—twenty, thirty. A minute sped by. Mr.

Hutchinson began to stare over the edge, down into the dark waters. But the inlet lay motionless. If there had been a lurking octopus or shark, followed by a struggle, bubbles would come to the surface. The waters would reveal some sign.

"I'm going down, sir," declared Peter doggedly. "It's not like Nahum to run contrary to orders. He's down too long. I don't like it, sir."

"Nor I," agreed Nahum's father.

"Peter dipped from sight. Again the ominous seconds ticked by. Mr. Hutchinson must have held his huge silver watch in his hand. The crew began to talk, wagging their heads sagely. 'Maybe it's one of them ghosts-of-the-sea snoopin' hereabouts.' They referred to a huge umbrella-shaped, gelatinous mass, lined with needle-like points. These spurs carry a subtle poison, which, on entering the system, temporarily paralyzes a person until he sinks. 'I've seen nothing to indicate their presence,' objected the scientist curtly. His uneasiness grew. A minute seeped by—two—three."

"Oh, I say," declared Steven, "no fellow could keep under water that length of time."

"I know," volunteered Blunder-Beth with bright eyes. "Quicksands."



PETER WENT DOWN FIRST

"No," answered her grandmother, "not quicksands.

"Fear clutched at Mr. Hutchinson's heart. He knew that something was now very wrong with both Nahum and Peter. Many ideas shuttled through his mind. Had sudden cramps seized Nahum? Was he lying helpless among the seaweed? Had Peter tried in vain to rescue him? But Peter was a powerful swimmer. He could easily bring Nahum to the surface, even though he were a dead weight. Mr. Hutchinson was in a quandary. If some terrible doom lurked under those frowning, black waters, could he be justified in risking another life? One may already have paid the price, young Peter's.

"He began to take off his own clothes. The second mate started to object and to plead with him. The scientist was adamant. He wouldn't hear to his arguments. 'They may be only stunned,' he declared. 'Even now artificial respiration would have a chance to save them.' 'And if you don't come back, sir——' 'You may put down grappling-irons,' he said grimly. He went overboard, leaving the second mate in command.

"He came back shortly, white and fagged. 'I can find no trace of them,' he admitted. 'Yet it's a sandy bottom, covered with kelp, as

I'd correctly supposed. I'll keep on going down——' 'Let me go this time, sir,' insisted the second mate. 'You look—shaky.' 'After much persuading Mr. Hutchinson permitted the second mate to go down. But he made the same useless search. The boys had vanished as if sucked from sight into the heart of the earth.

"Man after man went down—uselessly. Mr. Hutchinson doggedly insisted on manning the boats above the spot where the boys had disappeared. He wouldn't hear of putting back to *The North Star*. He seemed dazed. He insisted on patrolling the waters. If some deep sea creature were responsible, some sign might come, if they waited.

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"Some two hours later a faint sound came from the heart of the jungle. *Clang, clang, clang*; like the muffled beat of some invisible gong. Then, once more, *clang, clang, clang*. Silence settled over the island again.

"A great hope surged through Mr. Hutchinson's heart. 'Men, it can't be chance! That's the signal agreed upon if danger beset us. They're calling us from the jungle—with three reports.' He grabbed a musket. Two of his men imitated him. They fired three shots, to answer the possible call for help from the

jungle, and to summon *The North Star* with full speed. They drove the boats ashore. They left two men on guard with the boats and to hold *The North Star* in readiness with her cannon trained on the island. Then the scientist headed his men straight into the thicket.

“They found Nahum and Peter temporarily deserted by the Malays. The boys were bound and gagged, their backs lashed with palm thongs against the notched coconut palms. They were to be offered up as sacrifice when the moon arose. This was the custom peculiar to that particular tribe. But Nahum freed one arm by sawing the bonds against the jagged edge of the scaled palm-trunk. Malay spears had been stuck into the ground, one to the right of Nahum and one to the right of Peter. They were the executional spears. Nahum succeeded in pulling the heavy-tipped length of bamboo from the spongy earth beside him. He swung the metal point hard against the other metal spear-point. The clanging metal rang out three times, in accordance with the cry for help agreed upon. The wind was the only chance in their favor. It fortunately blew off shore, directly to the men in the jutty. The sound carried faintly, but perfectly, as they waited there for some sign of the vanished boys. And

the wind drove the sound away from the jungle and the Malays."

"But the holes in the shaft of this spear?" recalled Blunder-Beth.

"There were five magnificent pink pearls fastened into the holes by the aid of some pitchy substance. Both spears were so ornamented. Peter claimed one and Nahum the other. . . . As for the treasure in that sinister inlet—there remained none. There was a subterranean passage in the cliffs leading from the bottom of the little lagoon into the jungle. Some old volcanic disturbance probably hewed out the natural passage. The Malays had used it for reaching the pearls. Moreover, several of them hid there, guessing why the boats from the thunder-ship had put into the inlet. They intended to guard their satiny secret treasure. They had seized Nahum first, and then Peter. And the opening was so perfectly concealed by seaweed and kelp that neither Mr. Hutchinson nor his men later discovered it. The brown men carried the boys into a hollow space in the jungle, where they performed their weird dances and incantations on certain ceremonial nights. . . . So it was really the voice of the spears, crying for help, which saved Nahum and Peter from a highly unpleasant fate."

VII

LADY AUDREY'S ARMOR

"Blizzard!" exclaimed Blunder-Beth emphatically, glancing out of the window at the swirling sheets of white that buffeted the panes with tinkling tongues, "blizzard! It's a howling howitzer!"

"Un-huh," assented Steven quizzically, "what d'you know about howitzers, oh, heated one?"

"Huh!" protested Blunder-Beth. "Well, make it a Maxim rapid-fire, then. That's what the heavens are doing, pelting the earth with a million snow shots a second——"

"That's better," approved Steven with a droll attempt at weathered wisdom.

He looked like a venerable beetle, or a wise old owl, as he too peered out the window. Clouds of sleet and snow swirled about in a dervish dance.

Grandmother Stanton looked up from her knitting.

"Please put more pine knots on this blaze, Steven," she suggested. "The snow gets into my feet."

Steven complied. Then he drawled luxuriously: "I've got those originals all wrestled out in my geom——"

"You've nothing on me, Steve," gloated Beth.

It was seldom indeed that she conquered lessons first. Generally she sat in a brown study, dreamily staring out at the sky, the road, or at any point of the compass rather than the piled-up books.

"My Caesar's all complete—including thirty lines of advance translation."

"*Mirabile dictu*," quoth Steven under his breath. "Here's Nancy."

The slender, gray-eyed girl, slightly older than the irrepressible Blunder-Beth, now entered. There was the glint of amusement in her eyes, and a demure humor rippled about the mobile mouth.

"What a woebegone-looking pair!" she appraised. "Snow-bound, tighter than a drum."

"I know," decided Blunder-Beth. "Let's dig into the old chest in the garret. It'll give up a few more ghosts—live ones with stories attached."

"Travel along," urged Grandmother Stanton. "You haven't scratched the surface of that treasure-trove yet."

"It's your turn, Beth," recalled Steven gallantly. "But don't take a header in, as you dive about. I remember the last time——"

Ruefully Blunder-Beth rubbed a black-and-blue bruise on her right elbow.

"Huh!" she flung back. "Lucky I don't wear goggles!"

"Coming, Nancy?" invited Steven, over his shoulder.

"Watch me. I want to be included in the plunder-party."

The three scurried up the garret stairs with Beth ten feet in advance. From its accustomed nail on a beam, she took down the rusty key, that ponderous affair that had unlocked more than one secret from its century-old slumber in the dust-draped chest under the eaves.

The squeaking of a lock sounded like some giant rat, even worthy of the haughty notice of Puss-in-Boots. The lid creaked open. Many a time-stained heirloom reposed there.

Blunder-Beth, with her usual eager haste, closed her eyes and whirled herself around three times, that she might be "free of prejudices and unbiased by any first glimpse into the curio chest." With ludicrous care she bent forward until her dusky bob flung a saucy fringe over her forehead. She dipped a sturdy arm far within.

Her fingers came out with something cold and gleaming. The object had lain under a padded leather-jacket — that undergarment often worn in olden times beneath the armor of some jousting knight.

“My goodness!” blinked Steven, flecking an imaginary speck of dust from his glasses. “A steel headpiece—original first cousin to the gas-mask! What a beauty!”

A wonderful helmet it was, with its hinged vizor and its overlapping, perfectly riveted plates like the shining scales on the back of some silver fish.

“My goodness!” ejaculated Steven again. “You’ve picked a prize this time, Lady Beth.”

“It looks like the Helmet of Navarre,” added Nancy, for she nourished a secret admiration for that tale.

“Let’s double-quick down the stairs,” invited Beth, dropping the chest lid with a thud.

As she romped down, she clamped the helmet over her own medieval-like bobbed head. The casque fitted to a nicety.

They raced into the storm-bound room.

Grandmother Stanton smiled delightedly.

“That belongs to one of the finest coats-of-mail in our family. It’s the headpiece of Lady Audrey’s armor——”

"*Lady!*" sniffed Steven. "I didn't know there was any Joan of Arc in our family——"

"There was, and is. But the armor wasn't welded for her originally. It belonged to her brother Jeffry. He was killed in battle. So the armor lay, forlorn and empty, in the garret of the great house. Thereby hangs this tale."

They waited. Grandmother Stanton fingered the hinged vizor. Twice Blunder-Beth smothered a question before the annihilating glance of Steven and his muttered "Shh! Don't stop the story before it's started!"

"I fancy Beth here was very like her, this Lady Audrey Hutchinson."

Blunder Beth made them a deep bow. "Fetch my falcon, minion," she made mock command to Steven.

The boy frowned again darkly at the interruption.

"From what I can glean," Grandmother Stanton went on, "little Lady Audrey was always mixing into whatever occurred in Hutchinson Hall, as the estate was called. Those were troublesome days, in more ways than one now imagines. . . . Shortly after the death of young Jeffry on some foreign field of honor, that branch of the Hutchinsons went to Amsterdam to embark for the New World."

“Not on the long-suffering Mayflower?” protested Blunder Beth.

“Somewhat later,” acceded their grandmother. “The exact date is rather obscure—not that it matters particularly. The most memorable fact about Lady Audrey’s embarking was her luggage. You see, many sacrifices in personal possessions had to be made to find a haven here. Fine feathers were in disfavor—as well as were most luxuries that had been an everyday affair at the great house. Lady Audrey was permitted but one chest in which to carry whatever she held most dear.”

“I know what she carried!” Blunder Beth’s eyes sparkled.

“It was some time,” resumed their grandmother, “before anyone dreamed what the girl had salvaged to bring to the new sanctuary over the seas. She selected only a few of her plainest gowns, a handful of trinkets, and—the stained armor of her brother Jeffry.”

“How could she pack it?” asked practical Nancy. “Wouldn’t it take a chest like a casket?”

“No. The coat-of-mail was secretly and carefully dissembled. Its helmet, cuirass,

culet—every part and parcel, even to its shoes of mail, she fitted, like the forged pieces of the first puzzle picture, into her chest.

“Why wasn’t it discovered?” demanded Blunder Beth.

“The hall was dismantled, its priceless old possessions disposed of hurriedly. No one noted the coat-of-mail. After Jeffry’s death it no longer occupied the place of honor in the great entrance hall. The sight of it caused too many sad memories. It had been carefully packed away under the ridgepoles of the great roof. But Lady Audrey never forgot it. To her it whispered of chivalry, of honor, of the intrepid daring of that early youth who fought gallantly in it, and who met defeat as bravely. I fancy this Audrey was what we wrongfully call a bit of a tom-boy. I mean no criticism of the girl. But she must have doted on brave deeds and actions, rather than sitting quietly with her embroidery and her harp like the carefully nurtured girl of the times. This explains her later character. . . . There was a pretty to-do when Sir Gregory, her father, learned what she had secretly stowed away. Not that he didn’t prize the valor of his son’s death. But he was a hard-headed, practical man. And disaster had

taken away from him sentiment and the salvaging of keepsakes."

"I know what he said."

Blunder Beth popped up like a jack-in-the-box. She frowned darkly, crossed her arms and thundered, "Maiden, why didst secrete yon coat-of-mail? Art daft? Where art thy gowns and thy necessaries for the rigors of this new life? Thou art the flibbertigibbet of thy family. Take yon armor from m' sorry sight!"

"And Audrey took," supplemented Steven, the words springing to his lips before he realized that he, too, was interrupting the thread of the tale.

Blunder Beth squatted down again, dropping her dour and forbidding air.

Grandmother Stanton smiled. "Lack of imagination isn't the chink in your armor, Beth. You've plenty of it. I fancy Sir Gregory did lapse into just such a tirade when he beheld the metal trappings in Audrey's limited wardrobe. . . . Subsequent events proved that Audrey carried the marvelous coat-of-mail, piece by piece, up the ladder and into the loft of that new-world log-cabin. Sir Gregory, in the urge of more pressing affairs, straightway forgot the incident and the fate

of the armor. But not so Lady Audrey. She kept it secretly stowed away in her chest beside the crude bed or shake-down.

“Time rolled on. Affairs of the colony became daily more difficult. Spread Eagle and his braves made monthly massacre of outlying, unprotected posts. The little colony languished, sickened, and was thinned out. Sir Gregory, as became his station and experience, was made captain of the stockade. His own cabin was but a mere blockhouse within the crude surrounding walls. The Indians fought in ambush, in ways unknown to the English gentlemen, who scorned to take advantage of an opponent, whether his skin was white, yellow or red. The flaming arrow, the tomahawk, flung from the rear, did not enter their rules of fair fighting. Hence, they were doubly handicapped for the defensive, since they would stoop to no such means of warfare.”

“Well, musket and ball, sword and cutlass should have been a good counterfoil,” reminded Steven.

“In open battle, yes. But not in the skulking, predatory warfare practiced by the redskin, the redskin who didn't hold to Massasoit's code. . . . Then one day a courier

appeared on a sweating horse. The great gate had scarcely creaked on its hinges before the rider rushed in, pell-mell. He called loudly for the captain of the post. Sir Gregory met him with stern-set lips.

“ ‘Sir, the Indians are on the rampage, burning and blazing all outposts in their path to yonder stockade. Capt. Haviland of the imperiled post twenty miles away begs, nay prays, for succor, for every able, armed man who can be spared from your slenderly protected garrison.’ ”

“ ‘Sir Gregory was a man of action. He issued orders right and left. Horses were hastily saddled. Swords clinked. Powder and ball were stored away. And Sir Gregory himself headed the little handful of men he had picked, leaving less on guard at the stockade. His second in command was a mere stripling, named Roland Carstairs, the last of a great family, with more valor than sense, as events shall presently show. So the little cavalcade started through the great log gates. ”

“ ‘They had hardly passed when there was a scurry of feet. The flying figure of Audrey dashed out, crying out, ‘Oh, take me, sir! Take me! I’m the last of the family. When danger presses, a Hutchinson has never willingly

languished in duress, idle and useless. Oh, take me, sir!’

“Sternly her father regarded what he considered an unwomanly outburst, this tramping on family traditions. Certainly it was to become the talk of the post for many a day. And Sir Gregory particularly disliked a scene. Sharply he reprimanded her:

“‘Daughter, go thee hence, back to thy hearthside! Thou art the last of the race, yes. But heaven forbid that thou should be the first madcap in it, the first hoyden! Roland Carstairs is also the last of his family. So, thou art not alone.’

“With flaming cheeks the girl stumbled back inside the gates. But the color in her cheeks was not the badge of shame; it was the symbol of a smoldering sense of injustice. ‘Hearthside,’ indeed, she of a fighting race! As for Roland Carstairs—a dandified strippling! He played the harpsichord with charming grace and fenced like a courtier. And he still wore the velvet doublet when all the rest were content to brave the times in hardy homespun. Queer what Sir Gregory could see in that macaroni! Assuredly her father was blinded by a fine name and the fame of a great family. With cheeks still aflame

Audrey stumbled along. A short distance inside the stockade, she encountered Roland Carstairs. He was a handsome youth, with the manners of a gentleman—and the delicate face of a girl. His slender fingers were not yet bronzed and hardened by rigor and toil. He had a way of avoiding physical encounter with work and worry. At present he was polishing the hilt of his sword on his lace kerchief.

“ ‘Ah, Lady Audrey,’ he greeted her with a sweeping bow, clicking the heels of his buckled shoes together. ‘Time languishes for thee. Wilt not accompany me while I call my little troop for manœuvres? I have a new drill I would practice. It was used at Hastings——’

“ ‘Hastings, indeed,’ flung back the girl. ‘Thou forgettest that we are a long, long way from old England. And the hapless tricks of that bygone day have little power among red-skins who practice a different and a more difficult art.’

“ ‘The stripling straightened. ‘And what doth the Lady Audrey know of military tactics?’”

“ ‘I have heard sorry tales concerning what has happened by the foolhardy use of them,’

declared Audrey soberly. "'Tis a new and strange country. And it ill suits us to wear hither the customs or the *costumes* of other days.'

"The youth flushed. He turned on his heel and left her. Swallowing her disappointment, Audrey went back along the stockade, up the loft into her own little room. Once in a while the wind wafted Roland's voice, as he spurred on his handful of raw recruits to better efforts. It spoke well for the men that they didn't mutiny under the autocratic hand of this high-and-mighty substitute. But they had learned by severe experience that obedience is the first law of duty. So they performed for him to the best of their ability. From the slitted window in the loft Audrey could see them. They were the older, less fit men of the post. There was Peter Rankin, with his funny peg-leg; and George Mullins, blind in one eye. It was an awkward, ungainly squad whom the young dandy was trying to captain. At any other time Audrey would have smiled at their awkwardness. Now they seemed pathetically tragic, these discards, left out of the thick of adventure—like her.

"But Audrey didn't hold to dark fancies

long. Shortly she was down stairs at the great kettle, trying out the fat for the soap. She hummed a gay little air to vanquish the dark forebodings, which kept welling up in her mind, like some spring that would not run dry.

“The day wore on. Twilight draped purple shadows over the little stockade. A picket reported smoke to the south. Assuredly the redskins were pressing close to Capt. Haviland's post. Audrey's mind fled to her father, while her body mechanically performed the homely tasks of the log house. Night came, and with it a full moon, gorgeous as some golden doubloon. The heavens were shot with a myriad of stars, like the tips of gleaming pikestuffs, like the points of brandished sword blades.

“She heard the shrill voice of Roland calling to the night picket on guard on the wall. ‘Get thee down, Master Trolthrope,’ he said. ‘I will relieve thee.’ There was a self-sacrificing note in the youthful voice, as if he had performed a valiant feat indeed, by himself relieving Trolthrope. To his way of thinking, a captain should never shirk any duty imposed upon a subordinate.

“Audrey could see Roland's great cape and plumed hat silhouetted against the star-points,

as he paced back and forth on the wooden wall. 'Foolhardy,' she told herself. 'He should be behind the logs in the little spy-house, instead of out in the open, a perfect target for some stray arrow.' But Capt. Haviland's post was twenty miles away, and the tongues of smoke had died down at twilight. Perhaps she was unjust in the estimates of Roland Carstairs' tactics. Mayhap there was some sense behind his strutting bravado and arena-play.

"Lights slitted the logs of the crude cabins squatting within those scarred walls. There was clank of heavy pewter, of iron pots and kettles. The little garrison ate. The stars winked and blinked knowingly, as the moon floated aloft. Sir Gregory's cabin was situated on a little mound at the extreme end of the post. Its narrow loft window commanded a view of the sweeping knoll and the woodlands beyond. Mechanically Audrey's eyes picked out the giant shadows cast by the trees in the moonlight. The clumps of foliage were so dense that only gnarled darkness encompassed them.

"Suddenly the girl strained forward, her nose close to the slitted aperture of the darkened loft. Something moved there, unlike the customary shape of mere tree shadows. Other

things moved, chilling shadows topped by spurts of dark, like plumed helmets—the head-pieces of men in armor. But Audrey knew that the night shadows were not bristling with gay-plumed knights. No, indeed. Brown-skinned braves, hideous in warpaint, *also* be-decked themselves in *feathers*. Somehow Spread Eagle himself with a picked band had made a detour, and was swooping down in the shadows to surprise the unprotected garrison. Mayhap some ill had befallen Sir Gregory, and the piercing eyes of Spread Eagle had recognized the paleface chief of the distant post.

“A great fear clutched at Audrey’s heart, and a burning wave of excitement. Roland Carstairs would now be placed on his mettle. Would he stand or fall before the trial—this test by Indian fire?

“Audrey raced down the ladder, out the cabin door, along the shadows of the stockade to Roland, grandly pacing back and forth, his head muffled in his fine cape.

“‘Roland, Roland,’ she breathed.

“‘Who goes there?’ demanded the youth in a falsetto voice.

“‘Hush, oh, hush!’ she protested in an agony of apprehension. ‘Come down! Come

down at once. Danger is afoot—*red* danger.' Red danger meant Indians.

" 'Stuff and nonsense!' scoffed Roland Carstairs. 'Thou art weaving idle fancies from moonshine. Danger on a starlit night! Thy fancies have routed thy sense, Lady Audrey. Run back and brew thyself a beaker of herbs. 'Twill chase the chill of fear from thy marrow.'

"He stalked majestically away. '*Fear!*' he had taunted her! Crimson shame crept to the roots of Audrey's hair. But 'twas no time for hurt feelings and sundered pride.

" 'Come down! Come down, Roland,' she pleaded. 'The redskins skulk in the woods beyond the west wing of the stockade. 'Tis our weakest point. Summon thy men. Drop thee from sight.'

" 'A Carstairs never skulks before dangers,' answered Roland proudly. 'I will investigate and learn what wild animal has frightened thee to seeing things.'

"He started again to walk along towards that danger patch of darkness. . . . Now Audrey had wound a long woolen scarf about her throat and shoulders. For there was a blade in the breeze—the first hint of chill early autumn. Instantly, the girl found toe

space in the poorly-chinked logs of the stockade-wall. As noiselessly as a cat she was up and after the foolhardy Roland. She ripped the scarf from her and flung it straight about his mouth. She tied it taut. With its sturdy ends she yanked him full from the top of the stockade onto the soft sand inside. He was dumbfounded with surprise and rage at the gagging scarf. Audrey knew that she was raising a hand against a superior officer in command. On a military field her deed before a court martial was punishable by death. But she took the stout scarf and bound the stunned Roland's arms behind him, even as she saw that his mouth was firmly trussed against any outcry. She dragged him along the sand to the great iron wrought hinges of the gate. They had fancy, curving looped tops, the idea of some ironmaster in old England. She tied him securely to the lowest hinge of the great gate. Then she ripped off both stockings and bound his feet fast. Roland Carstairs' stubborn obstinacy would be out of the running—for a time.

“Audrey then dashed back to her cabin, bearing Roland's cape over her arm. She sped up the ladder to the loft. Again she peered out of the window. Yes, they were still there,

their numbers increasing. Not a moment was to be lost.

“Suddenly, on the top of the stockade, nearest the skulking band of braves, a powerful figure in a cape rose silently, as if pulled by unseen wires. It mounted higher and higher, a huge hulk, clearly limned out in the moonlight. It offered a perfect target for Spread Eagle's swiftly drawn arrow. The arrow pierced the cape, directly above the heart. The shot sped true. But it fell, like a useless, spent thing, onto the stockade. And the cloaked figure still moved forward—*unharméd*.

“With a grunt, Spread Eagle drew his great bow again. Two of his braves also strung arrows. Three winged lengths of death again touched the cloaked figure. The arrows fell, like broken things. And the figure still walked on, *unharméd*. Spread Eagle grunted in sharp gutturals to his braves. A veritable cloud of arrows winged against that charmed, moving form. Again they fell, like useless, moulting feathers. And still the Great Dark Spirit lived!

“Suddenly the all-powerful shape raised great arms from beneath the cape. Fire leaped forth, then a perfect volley of spurting



ALEXANDER KEY

A POWERFUL FIGURE IN A CAPE ROSE SILENTLY

tongues of death, as musket ball after musket ball pelted the shadows where Spread Eagle and his braves had skulked. With a wild war-whoop of frightened defeat, the unharmed redskins fled away in the darkness, carrying their stricken with them.

"The giant figure descended the ladder raised against the inside of the stockade, flung the cape from its shoulders. The moon fell full on a form completely decked in shining armor, the secretly prized armor of young Jeffry. Off came the helmet. And Lady Audrey's sternly smiling face looked forth. Along the wall the scanty garrison had propped up other ladders. Atop them, shielded behind the picketed post, they had echoed Audrey's first musket shot with a riddling round of fire from their own fowling-pieces."

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Blunder Beth. "Three cheers and a tiger for Lady Audrey!"

"No wonder the redskins took to their heels," mused Nancy. "Not a chance against that wonderful, magic coat-of-mail."

"So," finished their grandmother, "Lady Audrey's armor has been greatly prized for many long years. It stands for the valor and the chivalry of near-forgotten days. Put it away carefully, Beth. I would not part with it for a pretty penny."

VIII

THE NICKED BLADE

A loud thumping sounded from overhead in the garret. Then followed the squeak of protesting hinges. Silence, a pent-up, tantalizing silence. The three in the room below listened with eager ears.

"That's Blunder-Beth prowling about," grinned Steven, settling the nose-piece of his glasses more comfortably.

"She's searching in that old, brass-studded chest again," appraised Grandmother Stanton from her knitting.

"Fishing for a story," added demure Nancy. "It's full of treasure, all kinds of queer things that have seen stirring times."

Grandmother Stanton nodded. "There's not an heirloom in it that doesn't carry a story," she murmured proudly.

Rapid thuds fell overhead. The garret door opened. Swift footfalls descended the stairs. A girl burst into the room, a girl with tousled, brown-cropped hair and gray eyes aglint with excitement. About her waist was strung a dark belt. At her left side drooped a shabby

scabbard with a finely chased silver sword-hilt projecting. Gingerly Beth — Blunder-Beth as they called her from the awkward situations she was always running into — pulled out the sword with both hands.

“It’s a regular pirate-saber,” she gloated. “And, my! But it’s heavy!”

“A beauty,” appreciated Steven. “But its blade is heavily nicked! What a pity! Why wasn’t the nick ground out?”

“Careful, Beth,” cautioned the old lady. “The edge is still keen. Here, place it safely on the floor there.” She turned to Steven. “Why wasn’t the nick ground out? Because it’s a memento, the souvenir of a stirring incident that happened back in colonial days to one of your ancestors.”

“Please let’s hear the story,” promptly pressed Steven. “I can’t for the puzzle of it guess how fine steel like that should come by such a nick. Certainly no one would try to cut a spike with it.”

“You could never guess,” the old lady told him. “It’s really the oddest tale, how a nicked sword blade saved a garrison.”

“Oh, is that so? How exciting! Please tell us!”

She put down her knitting. Blunder Beth

sat cautiously close by the shining hilt of the sword, as if she expected the blade to bound up and bite her.

“As you know,” their grandmother began, “the colonists lived in constant terror of the redskin. Wherever possible, they dwelt in stockades—groups of log-cabins banded together for protection and surrounded by log walls. As a rule, the Indians avoided these garrisons, contenting themselves more with dropping down suddenly on isolated, unprotected cabins. . . .

“Roger Haviland, a stalwart boy of your own years, Steven, acted as aid to his father, Captain Haviland, of the particular post on which my story hinges. A certain warring Indian chieftain, named Silver Fox, had become a pest to the colony. Sorry tales drifted in to His Excellency, the governor. Finally he summoned, in conference, certain captains of the garrisons to hit upon some way of stopping the depredations of Silver Fox, snaring him or putting him to rout northward towards Canada. So Captain Haviland rode away at night on this mission to the governor. He left his son Roger in command, much to the chagrin of some of the older men of the post who coveted the role of captain *pro tem*. But

Roger was quite unconscious of this by-play of the men, for he was exceedingly proud to hold such a position of trust during his father's absence. So the growing envy fell away from him as if he had been encased in armor.

“At nightfall the second day, Roger sighted a sloop in the little harbor of the garrison. A small boat put ashore. Roger went down to meet it. An officer called for the captain of the post. He looked doubtfully at Roger when the boy told him that he was acting in command for his father, Captain Haviland.

“‘I bring,’ stated the officer, ‘secret, valuable stores of powder, shot and ball, to be buried with all possible speed inside the walls of your stockade. Other posts will call upon Captain Haviland for their own supplies later. ’Tis a considerable store—kegs and boxes aplenty.’ He looked again doubtfully at Roger. ‘Had I better land yonder valuable cargo, that settles the sloop to the water’s edge, or shall I weigh anchor and return when thy father, the captain, comes back?’

“Roger flushed slightly. He hitched the leather belt more closely about his waist, this self-same belt. He rested his hand on the shining hilt of his father’s sword. The officer saw

the movement and paused. There was dignity in it, strength, and rugged courage. He glanced at the determined jaw of the youth, at his bronzed face and broad shoulders. He saw the hands, roughened with toil, scarred, too. He reconsidered.

“‘I know Captain Haviland,’ he said, ‘a stern, unswerving judge of men. If he leaves you, his son, in command—well, where shall I unload the ammunition? Speak, lad, I will follow orders.’

“Roger Haviland looked across a freshly seeded plot of new ploughed land. It ran up the slope, from the water’s edge to the very shadow of the garrison walls. On the side of the freshly sown field arose a scarecrow, an effigy in homespun, topped by a faded, Continental hat.

“He gestured at the figure. ‘I would be a poor effigy indeed, to disappoint either my father or you, sir.’

“The officer frowned and glanced at the handsome sword-hilt swinging from the homespun hip. ‘I like not such tinselled trappings,’ he shrugged. ‘The elegancies of the courtier ill suit homespun, even though it is thy father’s and therefore prized by you. I am an officer appointed by His Excellency. But

I bedeck myself in no such finery. The sword has little use in this hardy land where the red-skin fights with winged bow, with flung tomahawk and the flaming arrow. A hand-to-hand encounter belongs to the warfare of other countries, not to this bleak and rock-ribbed New World. The Indian should be answered with powder and ball, since he fights from a distance, except,' meaningly, 'when he has felled his quarry. Sword play has little place in the daily dangers that beset us here. Of more use is yon scarecrow guarding, by its mock realism and the flapping of its empty arms and legs, the seeds in yonder field from the hungry maws of crow and blackbird.'

"Lights sprang up cautiously on the little sloop. Darkness brushed black wings over the bay. Soon a full moon would pour buckets of brilliance on land and sea.

"Roger Haviland stirred uneasily at the officer's earnest words. He knew that his father wore the sword more from force of habit than for any false show. Acting on sudden, boyish impulse, he said, 'I'll draw my sword and stick it in the belt of yon homespun effigy. The mock-manikin shall wear it for me until I re-enter the stockade after powder and ball have been safely buried inside. Then the

sword shall rest on the shelf above the fireplace, a memento of other days when gentlemen fought face to face.'

"The officer clapped the boy heartily on the shoulder. 'Well spoken, Master Roger Haviland. Now for unloading the sloop's stores!' He rowed rapidly towards the waiting sloop.

• • • • •
"Black figures moved like lively splotches of ink against the sheltering rocks. The crags sheered down to the water's edge, making an excellent, natural landing-place. The silhouetted shapes were burdened with kegs and boxes which they deposited with silent swiftness. In turn men, like black ants, carried the heavy supplies along the edge of the ploughed plot through the garrison gate. Never before had such a generous store of ammunition been landed there. It swelled out and over, running in a heaped maze of shadows to the very flapping scarecrow.

"'Fare thee well,' called out the officer finally, as the last store of kegs was rolled ashore. 'I wouldst call thy attention to this keg here. By rough handling its head has been stove in. Powder lieth uncovered and strewn about. Set it apart to be kept for present need. Again, fare thee well.'

“ ‘Farewell,’ called out Roger.

“He took the keg with the broken head. He tried to lift it himself. But it was too heavy. ‘Mr. Calthrope,’ he called, ‘wilt kindly lend a hand here? Let’s take this broken container of powder and set it in the shadow of the scarecrow for special attention later.’

“The older man frowned slightly. It irked him to be commanded, however courteously, by a brawny stripling in homespun. The two strained under the weight of the broken keg. They set it against the pole of the scarecrow.

“As Calthrope mopped his forehead there came a hallow *tap-tap* from the keg. He backed away from the thing. ‘What is it?’ he demanded. ‘Is the thing haunted, or has the effigy come to life?’

“Roger laughed heartily. ‘ ’Tis only my freed sword hitting the keg as the effigy flaps in the wind.’

“*Tap-tap-tap* echoed the keg promptly, to prove Roger’s simple explanation of the seeming phenomenon.

“Still Calthrope frowned. ‘A sorry use to put to a good sword. But what regard has mere youth for fine steel!’

“‘You know,’ laughed their grandmother, “then, as now, the older folk were always chid-

ing the younger for some seeming lack of respect and appreciation.”

“Huh!” flung out Blunder-Beth. “Little he knew! Just appearance, that’s all. What did Roger say then?”

“ ’Twas no time for word-play, no more than it was for sword-play. Roger hastened back to help in the last hurrying of the supplies within the safer walls of the garrison. I fancy the full moon worried him. It limned out their movements plainly. To be sure, Silver Fox had previously avoided armed stockades. But he was daily growing more bold. If any hint of Captain Haviland’s absence should leak out, or any scouting redskin should get wind of the coming of the sloop, and the unloading of its considerable cargo—well, Indian runners trekked on winged feet. There was no knowing where Silver Fox and his marauding band might break out next.

“Roger began to sigh with relief. The moon sailed high overhead. But it looked down on only a handful of supplies. The young commander had ordered his men inside the walls for the digging of a big trench to hold the powder against any flaming arrow. Only he and Calthrope lingered outside for the rolling in of the few remaining kegs. Roger saw

Calthrope now disappear within the great hinged gate, rolling a keg before him. The boy paused, flung back his shoulders and stared out to sea for some final hint of the sloop's faint mast-light. But the boat had disappeared around a jutty.

"As Roger turned back to his task, something seemed to move against the rocks, in the bright glare of the moonlight. Then the spot appeared motionless again. Roger rubbed his eyes. Perhaps they were playing him tricks. But he dropped quickly into the black shadows cast by some hollowed-out rocks. He peeked towards the spot where he fancied something moved. But only motionless moonlight lay there.

"Roger strained his glance back towards the open gate of the stockade. Between his dark hiding-spot and the wall lay the freshly seeded land. On its moonlit edge a dark form stood, seeming to peer intently seaward. A length of brightness fell away from its left side, like a long thread of silver. His father's unsheathed sword dangled there! At the foot of the scarecrow leaned the lone, broken keg of gunpowder. Oddly enough, by a trick of distance, the empty armholes were hidden behind the powder keg, as well the flapping nether garments.

Roger smiled grimly. Distance and that broken keg vested the effigy with a strikingly lifelike air. The three-cornered hat was tilted low over the collar. The mock figure looked very like some picket or sentry of the post standing guard and peering seaward.

“A slight move caught Roger’s surprisingly keen eyes. It flitted from a spot where he had fancied he had previously glimpsed something stealthily moving. He strained his eyes from the darkness towards the brightness.

“Then his heart skipped a beat. Behind a rock something did move, something that was feathered and brighter than mere moonlight. It was an Indian’s head-dress. A brown face crawled to view. The eyes were craftily fastened to the realistic effigy on the edge of the field. Followed a quick movement. A huge bow came in sight. A winged length of arrow was strung in its deerskin thong. From his hiding-post Roger could see the perfectly polished shaft of the arrow, and the glinting flint of its sharp tip.

“And he himself was unarmed, not so much as a knife in his empty belt. Moreover, the garrison gate stood wide, invitingly defenseless, for the Indians skulking undoubtedly but a stone’s throw away. He must hit upon some

desperate means of warning the post in time to close the great gates, to beat off the attackers. But if he started to run, the swift arrow of Silver Fox would instantly cut him down. If he cried out in warning, his puny voice would be drowned by the boom of the inbound surf and the racket inside the fort made by the stowing away of the supplies. Also, any outcry would reveal his hiding-spot. Sweat began to bead his forehead. He shivered from the sheer helplessness of his plight. He might as well be a trussed-up fowl.

“The Indian’s hideously painted shoulders moved. The great bow bent almost double. There was nothing strange about the mistake the redskin was making. It would only hasten their attack when the Indians discovered that the lone figure on the edge of the cornfield was merely an effigy on guard to intimidate the crows, rather than to protect the garrison against surprise.

“Came a faint whirr. A line of light streaked out. Silver Fox had launched his arrow from the great bow. With incredible swiftness the missile sped straight for the solitary scarecrow in its silent vigil on the edge of the sowed ground. There was a pause, a ringing, metallic sound; a spark; and a ter-

rific flash lit up the night. Then followed a long, roaring *boom*.

“Figures ran to the gate of the stockade, even as the Indians, ready to rush the fort, stood appalled. Another *boom-boom*, and the world seemed rent asunder by hidden lightnings.

“Then the great gate was clanged *shut*. Fire burst from between chinked logs. Rattle of musketry followed. Calthrope had seen the redskins, silhouetted by the moonlight against the sea. While he didn’t know what had caused the thunderous roaring outside, he had acted most effectively. The Indians fled through the jumble of rock shadows. The garrison and its fresh supply of powder and ball was spared.”

“I know what happened!” exclaimed Blunder-Beth, hopping up. “The flint-tip of Silver Fox’s arrow nicked this sword blade swinging from the scarecrow. It struck a spark, touched off the loose powder scattered about on the broken head of the smashed powder-keg.”

“Just that,” affirmed their grandmother. “A tinder-box, you see. Flint and steel, a leaping spark, and a roar like hidden, magic thunder as the powder exploded.”

“My goodness!” ejaculated Steven. “So

that's the story of the nicked sword! Well, I wouldn't have guessed the answer in a month of moons!"

"No, you would not," agreed Grandmother Stanton. "Put back the blade in its worn scabbard, Beth. The smoke of powder stained the steel, but Roger's grateful fingers polished it bright again. The nick he left as a reminder of the way even fine folderols may prove of use in some perilous moment. One can never tell, we find, just what is or is not useful, today or then."

(END OF BOOK ONE)



BOOK TWO
THE GHOST AT HAUNTED HOLLOW

PART I

THE DESERTED MANSION

Steven squinted through the freckling drops of moisture on the windshield. The shadows lay inky deep in the thread of a road. The little car wobbled and rocked, like a cockle-shell on a restless sea.

“I say, Nancy,” he suggested, “just take your handkerchief and dab some of the wet off the windshield, won’t you, please? I can’t see a thing with these smears. This trail’s queer. Seems as if I see a fork ahead. That’s not shown on the road-map. Wonder what’s wrong, anyhow.”

Nancy rubbed vigorously at the spattered glass. Blunder-Beth leaned forward eagerly. Her sturdy, brown fingers swished at the streaked windshield with the end of her four-in-hand. The road now appeared, an indistinct, gray thread flanked by sable evergreens.

Steven stopped the car. Anxiously, he poked his head out from the side-curtains. He turned his swivel spot-light full ahead.

"Lost!" he muttered. "I must have taken the wrong turn back ten miles or so."

The rain came down with redoubled fury, tapping at the top of the car with hollow, muffled fingers.

Nancy shivered. "Grandmother Stanton will be very much worried," she said, glancing at the clock on the dash. "We're hopelessly late already, and she was having hot biscuits and honey for us especially."

"Good!" ejaculated Blunder-Beth irrelevantly. "Isn't it a lark? I love getting lost, like Babes in the Woods. I—Ouch!——"

She thumped, like a limp sack of grain, against the door as Steven suddenly stepped on the accelerator and started the car with an abrupt jerk.

"Ough! That's my crazy bone!"

She rubbed it vigorously.

"Look!" exclaimed Nancy in a hushed whisper, "the trees are thinning out on the right fork. And there's the blurred outline of some kind of a building——"

"Black as soot," put in Blunder-Beth, pecking diligently at the ache in her elbow. "Regular ark of a place. Not a light, either. Ugh! Gives me the creeps. I'll bet there are bats skimming about here. If I as much as stick my

head out of the car one'll be sure to get snagged in my bob."

"Yea, verily," quoth Steven in a sepulchral tone. "Not one, but many. You could start a zoo!"

"Looks as if there were rats there also," added Nancy, as they sped towards the dark silhouette.

"Oh, you girls! Always seeing bogies in the dark!"

The rain now began to come down literally in sheets, and the road turned to a river. The tires squashed through, skidding coquettishly on the rear wheels. The windshield dimmed again, opaque with drops and steaming moisture.

"It's no use," declared Steven excitedly. "We'll have to hold up here until the storm lets up a bit. Any port in a storm's better than this poking about on a slick road without chains, when we're likely to skid into the ditch any moment——"

"Please pass me my poke," requested Blunder-Beth, her eyes wide with zest of adventure. "I'll pull it down over my head until just the tip of my nose sticks out. I'm not keen for offering my hair as a roosting place for bats."

She pulled her hat low over her unruly hair.

Steven got out, as they pulled up into a weed-grown drive.

The house seemed even larger on a closer view. It was of old-time architecture, with massive, Doric columns marching across the wide veranda at the front. It was generously besprinkled with gables, windows and wings, petering out to a long, rambling shed, attached to the structure in the rear. The blinds sagged at rakish angles. Some of the panes were broken. The forlorn glass stared out into the darkness, like wary eyes watching from the dark. There were thick pines scattered here and there on the unkempt grounds. They, too, added to the mysterious appearance of the deserted mansion.

A blind clacked suddenly as Steven went boldly to a broad, side door under a decrepit, weather-beaten arbor. He knocked thunderously.

Blunder-Beth laughed in the darkness.

"Isn't habit a funny thing!" she exclaimed. "Here's Steven knocking at an empty house, and three miles back he blew at a railroad crossing!"

"I'm trying to arouse the bats," Steven flung back, as his voice issued in muffled tones from under the arbor.

“Hurry!” urged Nancy. “We’re getting soaked to the skin, and it’s beginning to beat in the car. We’ll have to get a new top——”

“Leaks like a sieve,” added Blunder-Beth, vigorously polishing a drop from the end of her nose. “Water’s running down my back already, just like a ghost’s hand.”

“Don’t!” objected Nancy. “I can stand bats and mice, but I draw the line at ghosts.”

“All right,” cheerfully acceded Beth. “By request, we won’t see any ghosts then——”

Steven was hallooing faintly. His voice seemed to have receded further than the arbor.

“Come on in,” he invited. “The door’s unlocked. Bring the flashlights. Hurry!”

Blunder-Beth dove into a side-pocket and pulled out two black cylinders—the pocket flashes. The girls clambered out, each armed with a flash.

Pale white circles of light spotted the dampness. They revealed a broken marble slab, glistening before the sagged threshold. They showed a slit of darkness where Steven had unceremoniously lifted the latch and entered. The girls heard him clumping about inside.

Beth caught her heel on a slick spot on the door-step. She performed a ticklish pirouette, recovering her balance barely in time.

"I don't fancy a bashed head," she remarked, "or this creepy old place."

"Better watch your step," reminded Nancy gently.

They entered a long, dark corridor. It was panelled in time-stained wood. A magnificent carved balustrade escorted bare stairs around a spiral to the second floor. A majestic Knight in Armor stood against the panelled wainscoting.

Blunder-Beth was sniffing eagerly. Puzzlement was in her eyes.

"S-seems to m-me I s-smell something besides d-dampness and mildew," she stammered, as she sometimes did when gripped with great excitement.

"I do, too," admitted Nancy, as if discrediting her senses.

"S-smells like s-something to eat."

"Heigh-oh!" called out Steven. "Hurry up, you girls! Stop chattering there like magpies. Blunder-Beth, pass over your flashlight, please, like a good scout."

Steven took the electric torch and flung a scarring light onto the kitchen door. It was slightly ajar.

"Some one's cooking supper," he declared, "or my nose is wrong. It's lucky we knocked and didn't walk in on them."

“Funny way—eating supper in the dark,” murmured Beth.

Gingerly Steven knocked on the partly open door. They heard a faint snapping. But no other sound startled the stillness. No inquiring voice either challenged their presence or bade them enter. Silence lay heavy everywhere.

Steven knocked again. Still there came no answer.

Impatiently Blunder-Beth prodded the half-open door with her elbow. It snapped back, like the crack of an invisible whip.

Steven flung his light within. It fell on crimson embers smoldering on the wide stone fireplace. From the dog-irons a crane reared a gaunt, black elbow over the coals. Upon it a huge black kettle was suspended. Faint wisps of smoke coiled upward, smudging transparent fingers against the masonry.

There was little furniture in the great kitchen; a plain wooden table, topped by a dim square of oilcloth, also two chairs. On the oilcloth lay bread, hastily hacked from the loaf, a tin of meat, half consumed, and condensed milk.

Nancy was stooping close to the steaming kettle.

"Soup," she announced, "or rather, stew. It smells——"

"Yum-yum," finished Beth. "That's how it smells. My, but I'm famished. I'm so hungry."

Steven was squinting out the back door.

"There're prints of footsteps on the flagging," he stated. "Sizable steps, made by heavy-heeled boots. They disappear down the flagging towards the shed. Wonder what we'd better do!"

"I've found a candlestick!" announced Blunder-Beth from one end of the mantelpiece over the fireplace.

"And I've found a length of candle," seconded Nancy, from the opposite end.

Steven fished in his pocket for a match. Soon the candle was sputtering from the rusty holder in the middle of the table.

"We'd better conserve our flashes," suggested Steven with a boyish air of command. "No knowing what we may be in for before we get home and the rain holds up."

"I don't like this place," decided Nancy. "It's spooky."

Steven was studying his road-map with the aid of the flickering candle.

"Oh, I see," he was saying aloud. "This is where I went wrong, and we are now here."



BLUNDER-BETH PRODDER THE HALF-OPEN DOOR

He jabbed his little finger on a point of the map. The girls leaned over eagerly.

"Why!" gulped Blunder-Beth. "We're in—*Haunted Hollow*. Whatever does that mean?"

Steven frowned at the black letters. They might have been inky spectres trooping across his vision.

"I've heard of Haunted Hollow," he said slowly. "Grandmother Stanton's often mentioned it. And this must be the old Mainwaring mansion that dates back to Revolutionary times."

"Isn't t-there—isn't there s-supposed to be a g-ghost in this house?" stuttered Blunder-Beth, her eyes big with recollection.

"There is. I remember," declared Nancy. "That's why it is called Haunted Hollow. The ghost walks down in the willows in the hollow where the bank slopes at the south, at the opposite side from where we entered. Nobody ever comes here."

"I think," interposed Steven excitedly, suddenly sensing his responsibility for the safety of the two girls, "that we'd better search this place if we must spend the night here. Come on! Let's start through the house."

He took the sputtering candle and pushed his way back into the hall.

PART II

THROUGH BOLTED DOORS

“See this jolly old-timer, standing guard with drawn sword,” pointed out Steven, holding the flaring candle high.

It spurted flickering lights across the rusted giant figure in armor. The casque ended in a spur, the halberd was dappled with rust, and the sword in the gauntleted fist was encased in a heavy scabbard which rested on one mailed toe. The figure was wedged tight into the corner of the dim, panelled hall, its broad, armored back leaning heavily against the wainscoting.

“What a pity,” exclaimed Nancy, “to leave such a wonderful suit of mail to rust out here!”

“It’s colossal,” exclaimed Steven. “Tremendously heavy. It would have to be removed in sections with block and tackle, or a derrick.”

They now began their search of the rooms on the first floor. But the interiors were bare, forlorn and empty. There was no furniture there. Every room showed a fine old fireplace, blackened with neglect and dampness.

They went up the winding staircase. It creaked and groaned in protest under their weight. Their tread echoed and re-echoed through the silent house. Their figures spattered giant silhouettes on wall and floor. But neither the second nor third floor revealed any hint of recent habitation. The house above stairs was as empty and deserted as a tomb.

"Funny who skipped away from the kitchen," mused Blunder-Beth. "Must be some tramp, trying to get shelter from the rain. Perhaps he feared that we might be the rightful owners, caretakers, or agents."

"Perhaps they'll come back," murmured Nancy doubtfully.

"They will if they're as hungry as I am," muttered Steven.

"I hope they invite us to supper," groaned Beth, sniffing at the darkness. "I can almost smell that stew way up here."

They descended the broad stairs. Steven led the way boldly towards the kitchen.

"That's curious!" he flung over his shoulder.

"What's curious?" demanded Blunder-Beth.

"I left this door half open, after you girls went out. It's closed now."

“Perhaps the wind flung it shut,” suggested Nancy.

“We’d have heard it bang then,” declared Blunder-Beth. “It’s a heavy door, and it would take a big shove to close it.”

“Yea, righto, Miss Sherlock,” agreed Steven. “Well, I hate to be a confirmed knocker, but here goes——”

He flung his knuckles against the heavy panels.

They waited breathlessly for some scraping of a chair, for some faint footfall. But none came. Silence hung as heavy as the dust and the neglect over the old place.

With marked hesitation Steven pushed down the latch, opening the door. He held his candle high.

The smoldering carmine of the embers had blanched to a pale pink. The table appeared just as they had left it, likewise the two wooden chairs.

“Oh, dear!” exclaimed Blunder-Beth pensively, licking at her lips. “*The pot of stew is gone!* How very unfriendly!”

“Well, there wasn’t enough to go around,” said Nancy, consolingly.

Steven strode to the rear door and opened it. The wind veered sharply. It flung darts of

moisture into his face. Outside the night was pitch dark.

"Well, there's nothing to be gained by looking into blackness," he decided. "Let's go ahead and eat what's left on the table."

Blunder-Beth had been poking about in a little cupboard.

"Here's a tin of cocoa," she discovered joyously. "I'll rout out a kettle, and we'll boil some water. The tin of condensed milk will make fine cocoa."

"Wonder where the well is," queried Nancy. "There's no sign of a cistern in this old kitchen—not a drop of water."

"It's raining buckets," reminded Blunder-Beth. "Let's just put the dish outside, rinse it out, and catch rain-water enough to boil for cocoa."

"Good idea!" approved Steven.

He carried the bucket to the door and placed it on the wet flagging outside. The rain pattered into it busily.

"We shall have to find firewood to coax these discouraged embers into life," pointed out Nancy. "There's not a thing here."

They searched about, but Nancy was right. There wasn't a stick of anything burnable.

"Well," decided Steven, "here's where I scout into the cellar. Perhaps there are some

old boxes or other flimsy riff-raff down there. At least it will be dry. I'll take a flashlight along."

He set the candle on the table, and went towards the door.

"And I'll bolt this back door," he added, as he flung the rusty bolt into its barring position.

"I'm going to lock the side door," recalled Blunder-Beth, scampering out with the other torch. "I'll be back in a moment."

As she returned, bright-eyed and pink-cheeked, Steven went down the cellar stairs.

Nancy was cutting bread in small slices with the largest blade of Steven's jack-knife. The tin of meat had been emptied out on a plate.

Blunder-Beth sniffed at it.

"Well, it's better than nothing. I feel foolish enough coming in here and helping ourselves to someone else's supplies."

"If they'd wanted it, they'd have taken it with the stew," protested Nancy. Besides, we'll leave money on the table to pay for it if someone's still lurking about, too bashful to join us."

"I don't like this disappearing act," objected Blunder-Beth, shaking her bobbed head. "It seems too secret."

"I don't like it either," admitted Nancy.

"But we're lucky to be inside, safe and dry. As soon as we get a fire blazing and steaming hot cocoa, we'll be snug until morning and ready to hurry away."

"Steven seems to be an awfully long time, poking about in that spooky old cellar. Wonder if he's found any boxes or anything to burn——"

Beth went to the cellar door. She cupped her lips with her palm.

"Steven. Oh Steven!" she called out.

No answer.

"Steven!" Her voice rose more shrilly. "Wonder why he doesn't answer!"

"Probably he's in some far corner and your voice won't reach him."

Blunder-Beth went down three steps lower. She shouted again.

Then she called back to Nancy: "Come on, Nancy. We must keep together. Bring the candle. Steven ought to hear me anywhere. There's not a sound of his poking about. I'm getting scared."

Her voice ended in a plaintive little treble.

Nancy came down and patted her reassuringly.

"There, there," she sympathized. "You're hungry and tired."

The two girls descended hastily together, holding the candle high. They took the flashlight to be prepared for any emergency. The battery cell in it was fresh, so it ought to last them well if called into service.

The cellar bottom was pounded down hard. Moisture glistened on the bricks of the two huge chimneys and from the masonry of the foundations. Boxes and barrels were flung helter-skelter in all directions. They were fresh boxes and barrels, and there was excelsior, plenty of it, strewn about.

"Steven!" they called out together.

No answer.

They searched about among the riff-raff. But there was no sign of him there.

"Come" summoned Nancy quickly. "Here's a bulkhead. Help me push it. It's quite unfastened."

They strained together. Nancy flung the light of the candle down on the wooden steps.

"See!" she noted hastily, "they're *wet!*"

"That means," recognized Blunder-Beth promptly, "that the bulkhead door's been up—*very recently.*"

"Maybe Steven went out for something."

"That would be very foolish, and not like him."

There was a large rusty hook on the under edge of the bulkhead. Nancy fastened it.

"Come, let's go back. If Steven's outside, maybe he's back in the kitchen."

"Not through a bolted door," objected Blunder-Beth.

"Steven would find a way by the windows. Come!"

They raced back up the stairs, carrying a box of excelsior between them. They hooked the cellar door after them. But Steven had not returned to the kitchen.

"What's to be done?" demanded Beth. "I'm—I'm almost frightened."

"I don't like it either, but Steven's pretty wise for a boy. We can trust him to find some way out of a scrape if he's fallen into one."

"Perhaps he met the man with the stew——"

"Or the spook of Haunted Hollow," laughed Nancy with forced gaiety. She was trying to reassure Beth and banish her growing alarm.

The girls started a cheerful little blaze and soon had the water boiling. They drank cocoa and ate bread and meat, keeping Steven's share for him.

Then they went to the windows and looked out. The rain still pelted the house, and darkness held like a sable curtain outside. They couldn't see beyond their noses, as Beth said.

"I think," began Nancy slowly, "that we made a mistake hooking the bulkhead doors. Suppose Steven did go to investigate something? You know how adventuresome he is and how he dotes on solving any kind of a mystery. Just suppose he discovered something that might reveal the secret of Haunted Hollow, and he's following it up. He might want to hurry back through the bulkhead door. Let's go back and unhook it. We can keep this door here bolted down onto the cellar stairs."

"All right," agreed practical-minded Beth. "And we'll bring up another box for kindling."

They slipped down the stairs and through the damp cellar like flitting shadows. They cast fearful side glances where their candle light faded out into the darkness. They sped along to the bulkhead. Then they both paused abruptly.

As usual, Blunder-Beth was first to recover speech. She stared with wide and unbelievable eyes.

"Why! Oh, why!" she exclaimed. "We hooked the doors, didn't we?"

She seemed to want Nancy's reassuring words.

"Of course we did," confirmed Nancy instantly.

Blunder-Beth began to back away, as if she beheld a ghost.

"B-b-but, one-half of the bulkhead's up! A-a-and, the hook's b-been r-ripped out. There's only a *hole* there now. Oh, oh, I don't like this place! It's full of shadows and queer doings we can't see. Come, let's run!"

Nancy followed her swift steps back into the locked safety of the kitchen.



PART III

THE GHOST

After a while they dozed fitfully—curled-up girlish figures in the great room. Outside leaden clouds raced along the horizon like white galleons on a storm-tossed sea. The rain no longer fell in hissing, spattering spears of moisture. The wind blew fresh and strong from the south.

Blunder-Beth started up. She flung the sleep from her eyes as a small terrier shakes moisture from his furry jacket. Her body was singularly taut, as if she had suddenly been stirred to consciousness by some terrifying dream. She shivered slightly, though the pale embers on the great fireplace still gave forth a faint, coral glow.

Swiftly her eyes raced to Nancy's sleeping face. The girl had flung one arm across a cleared spot on the table. Her face rested upon it, and her lips curved slightly as she smiled at some antic done in sleep.

Beth looked about her in the dim room. What had aroused her so suddenly? She had been dead tired. And she always slept like a

"regular log," as she told everybody. She frowned a little, got up and tiptoed towards the window, following a blind instinct she was unable for the moment to define.

Down the southern slope a long line of black crawled like a giant boa constrictor. It was the smudged outline of the willows that snuggled into the little hollow in the dip between the grades. Under those willows the Ghost of Haunted Hollow was reputed to walk. Many weird tales were afloat concerning the deserted old mansion.

Had some sound come up from the Hollow and pierced her sleep?

As Beth looked she beheld the palest flicker of light at the dark line of willows. It sifted along the ground, setting up a series of serpentine coils.

Then Beth became conscious of a tall, black shape.

She felt no sensation of fear. She was intensely sceptical. She rubbed at her eyes, wondering if some flaw in the window-glass had caused her to imagine she saw that tall, black figure. Oddly enough, it seemed without arms or a head, a lank spatter of black, "like an unbroken exclamation-point," she told herself.

“The Ghost at Haunted Hollow,” she whispered. “The Ghost at Haunted Hollow!”

She dashed over to the sleeping Nancy and touched her.

“Nancy,” she called, “Nancy!”

Nancy stirred, opened her eyes and stared blankly at the eager, flushed face.

“W-w-wha-at is—the matter?” she asked thickly.

She was slow to awaken, quite unlike Beth in leaping pell-mell to decisions.

“Come, come,” whispered Blunder-Beth excitedly. “The ghost is out—down in the hollow. It’s walking there!”

She led Nancy swiftly to the window. The two girls peered through. They pressed their noses against the glass. A faint tongue of light seemed still to run along the hollow space between the double lines of willows. The trunks appeared like giant prison-bars shutting in some glowing cell.

But the black shape was gone!

“I see nothing but a light,” objected Nancy. “Is *that* the ghost?”

“No. Oh, dear, it seems to be coming this way!”

The moments ticked by—breathless, rather terrifying moments.

After what seemed an eternity, they heard a faint noise in the hall outside.

"What was that?" exclaimed Blunder-Beth, clutching at Nancy's elbow. "Out in the hall!"

They stood very still, scarcely daring to breathe.

Their silence was rewarded. It came again, a faint, hollow, ringing sound, like the muffled clang of some distant temple-bell.

Like a flash Blunder-Beth stripped off her pumps and tiptoed across the floor to the heavy door. Its latch lay like a shrunken tongue of metal in the original hole that had been fashioned for it. This opening was several sizes too large. Beth slipped one eye to the space, taking care not to make it clatter and reveal her spying presence. Nancy hovered at her elbow.

"Somebody's moving out in the hall." Beth's words were the faintest whisper. "I can just see a black shape beyond the big Knight in Armor. . . . And, oh, Nancy, *it's coming this way!* It's coming this way! Oh, I'm so frightened! It's the spook up from the hollow!"

"Hush! warned Nancy, though her voice

quivered. "This door's bolted. It's awfully heavy."

"B-but, w-what's a d-door to a *s-sp-spool-ok!* *It* can come through the latch-hole!"

Nancy smiled in the dark. Then her face sobered.

The two stood listening. But they heard nothing—no soft, approaching footsteps, no swish of ghostly garments, no clatter of ringing metal——

Slowly the latch on the door began to move, to rise.

Blunder-Beth covered her mouth with her fist, backing away.

As noiselessly the latch dropped again, trickling away to silence.

Then a whisper filtered through that hole above the latch:

"Sshh, shh! Nancy! Beth! Nancy, I say."

"*It's Steven!*" Blunder-Beth almost forgot to whisper in her excitement.

Swiftly she unbolted the door.

Steven came in, a curiously laden Steven. Across his shoulders he carried a gunny sack. Many huge bumps protruded from it, like some generously loaded Christmas pack.

He bolted the door behind him. He put the loaded bag onto the floor.

His face was streaked with rain and mud; his shoes were soggy. They went *squash-squash* where he stood, and his clothes drooped muddy and sodden. But his eyes blazed with boyish excitement.

"Such a lark! I've found out the secret of Haunted Hollow. And—*I've laid the ghost!*"

"W-wh-what is it?" came in unison.

Steven leaned against the table, mopping his face with a dingy handkerchief.

"How did you get out of the cellar?" asked Blunder-Beth hurriedly, without waiting for his answer.

"*Walked out,*" he told them, "—on the trail of the ghost. . . . I was ducked down behind some of the boxes, pulling out excelsior, when I heard a noise in the other wing of the cellar. I crawled over to investigate. And what *do* you think, girls?"

"What, oh, what?" excitedly.

"There's a flat stone on the cellar bottom there. It began to rise, like the lid on a box. A tall figure in black came up. I thought it would never stop coming up, it was so lank and long.

"And when it got out, it was a long streak of black, straight as a beanpole. It was all dressed up in a black robe that almost dragged

on the cellar bottom. It streaked through to the bulkhead, unlocked it and went out into the darkness. I went after the thing. It went down to the willows. I kept at a cautious distance.

“When I got down there a curious thing happened. There was another big flat stone at the base of one of the willow trunks. The black figure pulled it up. Another one came out, all done up in black. This one wasn’t so tall. He carried this gunny sack on his back. They put their heads together. After a bit both of them went down the hollow along under the willows. . . . I had a sudden idea then, that they’d go back to the old house through the secret tunnel, capped by the big rocks. So I went up to the cellar as fast as I could. I loaded all the bricks and heavy stones I could find onto the flat stone there.”

“S-suppose they should s-suffocate!” stut-tered Blunder-Beth.

“They’ve got it all ventilated with pipes that come out into the stubble. You wouldn’t notice them except on a close-up examination. . . . Then I raced back to the willows to await developments. They were still out of sight. So I crawled out and dragged this bag away from where they had left it to a clump

of grass beyond where I was hiding. When they came back there was a pretty to-do over the mysterious disappearance of the bag. They pulled up the stone, and dove into the tunnel, like rabbits into a warren. I was ready for them. I piled big stones on that end of the tunnel. And I've got them trapped! There's no danger of their suffocating, so don't worry about that. It's jolly well ventilated, as I found out."

"What's in the bag?" demanded Blunder-Beth.

"That remains to be seen."

He took out his jack-knife and ripped the sack open.

They cried out in surprise.

Silver cups, plates, spoons, all kinds of assorted vessels made of silver, glimmered up darkly. They were exceedingly heavy and rich. Many of them were etched.

"Regular old Sheffield," recognized Nancy. "Like Grandmother Stanton has. Almost a whole silver service. Wherever did they get it?"

"That's easy," replied Steven instantly. "They got it at the Dillingham's. Don't you remember a couple of months ago, that the house was burglarized and all the fine old



A TALL FIGURE IN BLACK CAME UP

family plate taken? It was the first big house-breaking in this vicinity, although there seems to be enough happening elsewhere. I believe that these are two of a gang that comb the country for unprotected estates and a deserted place to hide away their dishonestly acquired goods in safety."

"Perhaps there's a reward out for them," suggested Beth.

"Oh, another thing," recalled Steven. "I believe the tunnel in the cellar follows an abandoned secret staircase running to the panels in the hall wainscoting, and that the Knight in Armor covers the opening. One of the mail plates in the back of the figure seems to be loose. I peeked in through one of the eye-holes. Evidently this old house has been the secret storage vault of much stolen goods."

"What made the black figure appear so terribly tall?"

"Trickery," rapped Steven. "The fellow had a broomstick to increase his height, and to strengthen the spook story about the haunted house, in order to keep away any unwelcome stragglers."

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When morning came Steven took the girls to Grandmother Stanton's. Then he went to

the office of the sheriff. Some time later the sheriff unearthed the secret store of hidden, stolen property. Steven's theory concerning the Knight in Armor proved to be correct. Later, by careful questioning, the two miserable fellows, caught in the tunnel, gave information sufficient for capturing the rest of the group.

So the Ghost of Haunted Hollow was effectively laid when Steven took the wrong trail to the deserted old mansion.



THE RIDDLE OF RAVENSWOOD

PART I

THE FLORENTINE CHEST

The sun dipped down like a fiery lozenge into the rent between the hills. Twilight ladled out purple and amethyst shadows through the valleys. Wisps of fog-damp crept out of the deepening crevices. An owl hooted in a plaintive, minor *Whoo-whoo* from the concealing shadows of a spruce over the high, gray wall.

Steven stopped his Pilot car before the arched opening. Heavy gates of Venetian grill-work barred the entrance. Pilot honked twice.

Immediately, as if urged by unseen fingers, the great gates trembled, moved, buckled inward. Majestically, they opened their black, barring lips, like some sluggish monster suddenly prodded to activity by hidden, commanding hands.

“My!” exclaimed Blunder-Beth. “Isn’t it spooky and delightful—blowing open the gates of Bagdad so!”

“Electric,” explained Steven meticulously, “controlled by a switch in the house. Pretty clever, I call it.”

Pilot crunched along the white shell drive. It wound like a frosted tendril to the porch on the side of the sprawling, gray house. The dwelling lay embedded in its acres of evergreens. The great gates closed noiselessly behind them with only a slight indicative click of the automatic lock.

“Now, Steven,” began Nancy with final, warning concern, “do be careful not to say *bully* or anything slangy, you know. And don’t you dare forget about those forks! If—if you have any doubts, just wait, do you hear, and watch Aunt Sarah. I don’t know what new things she may have imported—fancy fads we may never have seen. B-but, Steven, don’t get absent-minded. Just stop, look and listen!”

“Oh dear,” blurted out Blunder-Beth dolefully, shaking her head. “Oh, deary dear! I know my hands’ll shake so that I’ll spill the soup all over myself. I just know they will. I’m scared blue—indigo!”

Steven laughed. “Well, as long as you don’t fall into it and have to be fished out——”

"Children," groaned Nancy in mock horror, "where *have* you been reared!"

Their three laughs rang out simultaneously. Nancy's voice was such an admirable imitation of Grandmother Stanton's oft-repeated lament.

"Oh dear," wailed Blunder-Beth. "I've caught my stocking on the footrest! Now there's a slit as long as an inch-worm above my heel! What shall I do?"

"Wounded already!" exclaimed Steven. "Received in bad condition. Return at owner's risk, Nancy."

"It is a bad hole," appraised Nancy, frowning at the rent. "Isn't that just like you, Blunder-Beth! We should have crated you."

"Crated nothing," scoffed Steven. "Sent her in a box car!"

"But the hole in my heel," bemoaned Beth. "What's the use of poking fun at me? That won't mend it."

"Cracky, I have it! I'm getting to be a perfect lady."

Steven dipped into a side pocket and brought out an object. He fumbled into it excitedly, slowing down into safe second and crawling along the drive as he guided the car

with one hand. He passed over a little tin box to Nancy.

“Try this First Aid to the wounded—hose,” he suggested.

“The box of surgeons’ tape!” ejaculated Blunder-Beth. “Hurrah! I’m saved!”

“Stuff and nonsense,” returned the boy. “Your life doesn’t hang by the thread of your stocking heel, Lady Achilles.”

In a twinkling Nancy cut off a length of the sticky tape. She deftly inserted it under the tear and drew the edges neatly together, patting them down. In a moment the distressing rent had vanished.

“Blessings on that triple-knit heel!” exulted Blunder-Beth. “It’s now an invisible wound. Puzzle: Find the hole in my heel!”

“Richard is himself again,” quoted Steven.

“Gracious, my heart is fluttering like a fly-wheel,” confessed Beth. “I’ve begun to blunder badly already. What will I do before morning!”

“Hush!” warned Nancy with matronly concern. “The door at the side entrance is opening.”

“My goodness!” exclaimed Steven. “Look at the What-is-it all dressed up in silver and

lavender! Can it walk? can it talk? or does it *too* run by an electric switch?"

The liveried servant came down to the car. His face was as expressionless as a mandarin's. Like a well-greased puppet, he bowed slightly, reached for the tonneau door, opened it and stood stiffly at attention.

The girls got out demurely. But Blunder-Beth's mouth twitched several times. Her little face was set grimly in a laudable effort to appear casual and dignified, rather than scared and amused.

The manikin in livery deftly reached into the rear seat and brought out the big leather suit-case. But in Beth's tightly clenched right fist gleamed the new, diminutive week-end case. A wave of color raced to her hair. She attempted to screen the box with her body. But Greataunt Sarah's man reached out a firm, discovering hand and took it from her.

"Miss Stanton is waiting for you in the library," he announced. "She asks for you to come right in and see her for a few moments before dressing for dinner. I'll show you to your rooms later."

He held open the paneled door. The gloomy, dark corridor glimmered like dull, burnished brass under the blazing lights of

the scintillating overhead chandelier. Down the corridor, from their tarnished gilt frames, the painted effigies of many bygone Stantons stared through the screening shadows of the great hall. The parquetry of the ancient floors shone with satiny softness, anointed with the wax of service and mellowing years. Arras and tapestry, dusky and dim, only added to the mysterious richness of the hall.

Blunder-Beth hugged herself ecstatically. She was wild to inform Nancy that it whispered of ravens, of skeletons in armor, and the spinneys where witches must have held sway every night in the year, let alone Hallowe'en. But the servant, elegant in lavender and silver, had touched her to dumbness. Gingerly he set their two pieces of luggage before the great hall fireplace, stepped back and gestured.

"This way, please."

Meekly they followed him—demure Nancy in the lead, Blunder-Beth tugging at a stray lock over her left ear in a vain attempt to restore the unruly curl to it, and Steven, who forgetfully lifted his heavy-rimmed spectacles to scratch at the bridge of his nose.

The man in livery stopped before a closed door. He tapped lightly, then opened it.

A little old lady sat in a huge, upholstered chair before a long table. A droplight stood on the polished top, splashing the table into a golden pool.

The little figure arose from the chair and tripped forward to greet them.

Thought Blunder-Beth: "She's just a little sliver of a woman, spry as a bird, dark like one of her own ravens." For Greataunt Sarah kept an aviary with many rare, feathered specimens from all over the world, with the English raven predominating.

She came forward to meet them eagerly, touching the table with one slight, white hand as if for support. A concealed button transformed the room into a blaze of light. Quietly she studied them.

"Nancy, Steven and Elizabeth," she tabulated. "The Terrible Three! My, but you've grown! Straightened out, too. Steven I shall call Sir Beetle, because of his bristling brows and his goggle-eyed spectacles. Nancy shall be Lady Demure, and——" She turned to Beth.

"I'm Blunder-Beth," interposed the girl promptly, "because I've fallen through everything except—China."

Greataunt Sarah's face glinted into silent,

amused merriment. Her eyes danced behind her spectacles, and her lips twitched. There was a slight resemblance between the two.

"Indeed," she smiled. "I fancy so. Perhaps you can blunder into the truth concerning the riddle of Ravenswood. Only I hope you don't have to go to China for the answer."

"The riddle of Ravenswood!" the three chorused. "What is it?"

"A puzzle?" added Beth, the irrepressible. "A ghost, a haunt, some dark mystery?"

"You will know as soon as dinner is over. We'll come back here. It all surrounds that carved chest over there in the embrasure. I discovered it up in Florence. And I heartily wish it were back there!"

She gestured at a long, dark, carved chest. It must have been at least seven feet in length. Its sides were wonderfully modeled into twining leaves and cunningly concealed blossoms.

"I'm very much afraid I've brought a haunted chest from Italy," she told them. "How it came into my possession is quite a story. I was warned against purchasing it, but the warning merely amused me. After dinner you will hear all about it."

"Was that why you asked us down—to help you answer the riddle?" demanded Blunder-

Beth, with all the confidence of sincere, secure sixteen.

Greataunt Sarah smiled whimsically, indulgently.

"Perhaps," she admitted. "Though I confess I wanted to see how 'terrible' you have grown to be. I recall that Steven and Beth were always hunting for witches in Ravenswood when they were knee-high to grasshoppers. So I fancied you wouldn't be bored spending a few days with your greataunt, particularly when you learned of the pranks my Florentine chest has been playing on me."

"Oh goody!" exclaimed Beth, despite Nancy's uplifted brows. "Won't it be just too jolly for anything! We dote on riddles and mysteries."

"Yes. But we are about zestless on the doings of the dead and gone Hutchinsons," interposed Steven. "It certainly will be fun mixing into a real, live mystery happening here now."

"Now, children!" dismissed their aunt, suddenly spreading her arms wide. "Run along now. Scrub your faces and get into your best bibs and tuckers. Blunder-Beth, the curl is sadly out of your left ear lock. Steven, there's a smudge of car-grease under your chin. And

Nancy—well, just suppose you wash off that pained and proper frown. I'm not so formal on second sight, you see. Just make yourselves at home. Never mind Jenkins' high and mighty air. He doesn't like my livery; the collar tickles his chin. That's what makes him look so pained. Just forget him and the others. Pretend they're part of the furniture."

They scampered away. But Blunder-Beth slipped on a bit of the high-glazed floor and went down with a loud thump—"sliding to goal," as Steven declared.

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Greataunt Sarah sat with the three grouped about her. They faced the huge, carved chest. She had turned the key in its beautifully chased lock and flung up the heavy, squeaking lid. Only mellow, gleaming wood stared back at them.

Hurriedly Steven had examined it with his glasses close to the grain. Then he had studied the intricate carving, assisted by Beth.

"Not the faintest sign of a hidden spring or panelling," she stated disappointedly.

"So much the better," declared Nancy brightly, cheerfully. "Its secret will be all the deeper. I like hard riddles."

"It is a deep one," agreed Greataunt Sarah.

“Now stop fidgeting about and listen. . . . As we know there are many beggars in Italy. And Florence, or Firenze, is no exception. One night, just at twilight, I was crossing the Arno on one of the innumerable little bridges, when a cripple held out his cap to me. He was little more than a lad—about your age, Steven. I was struck by the plaintive, wistful beauty of his face. He looked like del Sarto's ‘David.’ His face seemed to glow from the inside. I placed an English sovereign in his cap. I had brought the gold piece down to Florence from England. The gold was the exact shade of his hair.

“ ‘Wait,’ he said to me in Italian, ‘Signorina, wait.’

“I waited, wondering, of course. The average Italian beggar rarely says anything except ‘Grazia’ and a few words of blessing.

“ ‘Signorina,’ he entreated, ‘come back here at ten, when the people are not here. I will be at my post in the shadows of the arch farther along. I have a secret to impart to you. You are the first who has crossed my palm with gold since the paralysis crippled my body. And I am not ungrateful.’

“I promised to come. At ten o'clock he was there, a pathetic, eager, boyish figure.

“ ‘Signorina,’ he begged, ‘come close and listen. Only the night winds are abroad and the stars. But even the night has ears and eyes; so I will whisper in Spanish. There’s a little shop ten blocks away in a tucked-in alley. It is the shop of Giovanni. So it is labeled ‘*Giovanni, Collector of Curios.*’ There’s a treasure in that shop which men call accursed. Well, most treasures are accursed. High fortune and danger walk hand in hand. It is a great Florentine chest, with a crest of the Medicis carved on the hilts of the swords that are cunningly intertwined with the floral patterns. The chest is in disrepute. It is said to be ill-omened, attainted, to bring woe on whomever shall possess it. Hence it is shunned by collectors; hence it languishes, a magnificent work of art, the relic of a great family, and a greater age. But I, Pietro, know better. There’s something weird about the chest, something strange and mysterious. It is not haunted. Oh, no! It is a treasure, greater than its carven sides indicate. Buy it, in all haste, Signorina. It may bring you perturbation, but it will also bring you joy. It will cause you to think. Buy it, I implore you. Giovanni will sell it for a song and give you

his benediction for ridding his shop of its dark, forbidding presence.'

"I was impressed by the lad's earnestness. I went to Giovanni's shop the next night. You see how beautiful the chest is. And I bought it for less than a song—for a few bars of melody really."

"Not jazz," commented Beth. "It looks like an aria from *Il Trovatore*."

"Not bad for sixteen," appreciated Great-aunt Sarah.

"Looks like a casket to me," decided Steven grimly.

"Oh, Steven," shivered Nancy, "what a terrible idea!"

"Well, there's still another story connected with its early history," Greataunt Sarah informed them. "Giovanni told it to me. He was anxious that I should learn the worst about the chest, that I should not buy it without knowing its ancient, questionable history."

"B-b-bul——" began Steven, and nipped off his expression just in time.

"Double bully," finished Greataunt Sarah. "Why not be natural?"

"I will," stated Steven thankfully. "I wasn't to use slang. The girls have been priming me all the way down——"

“Now, now, now, don’t hide behind us,” protested Nancy.

Their aunt went on: “They called it the Chest of the Lost. According to Giovanni’s story, this chest of the Medicis possesses one peculiar property, that of causing things to vanish, to disappear as if swallowed up within its solid sides. A daughter of one of the Dukes de Medici first owned the chest. It was full of her scented, satin things, I fancy. Undoubtedly she sat upon it, curled up, doing her embroideries or dreaming over the Arno. One night she disappeared completely from her perch on the chest. No trace of her was ever discovered. After that, according to Giovanni’s story, a long list of people and objects laid upon the chest completely vanished.”

“Bah!” scoffed Steven. “Thrilling—but not believable!”

Greataunt Sarah shook her head. “Listen,” she urged. “I brought home with me a wonderful, cobwebby, lace mantilla that I purchased in Madrid. It was as sheer as spun moonbeams, as gossamer as if woven from cobweb cables. It was so fine and sheer that I could conceal it in the thumb of my glove. Anything so delicately fashioned enters into the realm of the fairies.

"Last week I sat up late in this room reading. I sat on the great chest till long past midnight. The Venetian windows, and door to the veranda there, stood open. I had this Spanish mantilla thrown over my shoulders. It is woven of silk and gleaming silver, so that it shines like spiders' webs on the grass. The wind blew that delicate film of silk from my shoulders onto the old chest. I recall it now, but I didn't at the time. I was too engrossed in my story. Jenkins summoned me to see the sick housekeeper. So I went out, leaving my scarf on the carved chest.

"When I came back it was gone, like a wisp of fog-damp. That isn't all! Plainly, as I slipped through this darkened room, with the moonlight slanting across the chest, I heard a series of faint knocks coming from the very heart of the ancient box."

"What did you do?" demanded Steven.

"Went to the table there, switched on the lights, listened intently. And as I stood there, the sound was repeated plainly, like muffled, fearful fingers, tapping to me in some spook tongue."

"Do you know the Morse code, Aunt Sarah?" asked Steven eagerly.

"I do not. That's where you may help me

out. I remember when you were a little lad that you had a little amateur telegraph outfit."

"Which you gave me," reminded Steven proudly.

"What did you do next, Aunt Sarah?" interposed Blunder-Beth with a distressed look in Steven's direction.

"I went over and flung up the lid of the chest. But it was just as empty as it is now, with not so much as a hair inside."

"Did the tapping stop then?" queried Nancy.

"Yes, it did."

Steven strode across the heavy pile of the rug. He took hold of the carved cover. He eased the heavy top up. It squeaked and protested dolefully in a lugubrious minor key.

"Gracious!" Blunder-Beth covered her ears. "It's enough to shiver my spine!"

"It's enough to shiver its timbers," countered Steven.

"Well, it stopped the ghostly tappings in the chest, as I've told you."

"N. B." laughed Nancy. "A new panacea for ghosts! An honest-to-goodness spook slayer, banshee banisher! A few bars in a minor key, muted to a melancholy wail!"

"All a body'd need," raced on Beth, falling into Nancy's mood, "would be a violin. Any haunted place could merely be fiddled into silence."

"As if a ghost had a keynote and could be razed, like the walls of Jerico," finished Great-aunt Sarah. "It's a pretty thought—in theory."

"But what about the tapping chest and the vanished veil?" prompted Steven.

"Well, that happened a week ago," she answered. "The veil's still among the mysteriously vanished. And I confess I haven't ventured in here after dark since. I don't relish what I can't understand. Sometimes this empty house does heighten my fancies."

"Goody!" exclaimed Blunder-Beth, glancing at the tall colonial clock in the corner. "The witching hour is supposed to fall between twelve and two. It's now ten-thirty. Let's wait here until it's just time for the big clock to strike twelve and then switch out the lights. May we, O may we, Aunt Sarah?"

Their aunt glanced toward the curtains covering the full-length windows opening upon the wide veranda. The night wind sifted through with gently swaying fingers. The

moon edged up over an evergreen until it appeared like the clean half of a golden seal.

“Yes,” she agreed. “Meantime,” she reached for the drawer in the big table, “I’ve some perfectly fresh marshmallows. We’ll squat on the hearth here, before the fire, and toast them. There’s nothing like a bright fire on the hearth and toasted marshmallows to lay puzzling riddles—temporarily.”

Sometime later the faint whirr of preparatory wheels issued from the tall colonial clock. Promptly Steven reached for the switch. The room lay shrouded in velvet blackness. Faint, frosted bars of moonlight sifted through the open window.

The four waited in eager, excited anticipation—for the first suspicious sound.



PART II

THE WRAITH

“Kerchoo! Kerchoo!”

Despite her heroic efforts Blunder-Beth failed to stifle the sneeze.

Nancy seized her and pressed her face against her shoulder. One more muffled *Kerchoo* followed faintly.

Greataunt Sarah chuckled in the darkness. Steven all but snickered.

The minutes ticked away—half an hour, an hour, an hour and a half. Still the four waited tensely. Even Beth was unusually still—for her.

Nancy glanced swiftly in their aunt’s direction. Greataunt Sarah dozed lightly with her head drooped forward on her chest.

Just then a faint sound seemed to creep forth from the shadowy embrasure between the long windows. The three sat up rigidly. Greataunt Sarah dozed on unmindfully.

The sound came again, not so faintly this time. It was like some hesitating tap on yielding wood.

Tap, tap, tap-tap-tap emerged from the long, dark chest.

Steven strained forward. A frown puckered his brows together until they met in a black smudge over his nose.

“My gracious!” he whispered under his breath. “My gracious!”

Blunder-Beth’s eyes appeared as big as agates. Nancy’s face was stamped with timidity—disbelief. Then:

Tap, tap, tappity-tap resounded the hollow knockings straight from the carved chest.

Steven reached over. His prodding finger found the switch under the table. Light leaped through the darkness of the room.

The boy sprang towards the chest. He flung back the lid. It creaked and croaked moanfully under his urging, eager fingers.

Greataunt Sarah opened her eyes, straightened up, stared about her. Comprehension flooded her features. She, too, arose to her feet, along with Nancy and Beth.

With a half glance at the empty chest, Steven next plunged through the open Venetian window onto the veranda. His fingers pressed the electric switch there, bathing the piazza with brilliance. With the coming of the frosty autumn days and the departing of winged mid-summer pests, Miss Stanton had ordered the screens removed from all the en-

trances of Ravenswood. She declared that wire-mesh cut down the tang of the autumn breezes. So no wire-strung barrier impeded Steven's headlong progress.

Blunder-Beth nosed after him hurriedly. Steven was poking about among the wicker furniture, around the piazza boxes, the great jardinieres. Then he leaped over the rail and searched the hydrangea bushes, the snow-ball bushes.

Suddenly he straightened up. He held something between his thumb and forefinger, something that winked and blinked. It glinted like some molten drop of gold shaken off by a runaway comet's tail.

"Whatever is it?" breathed Blunder-Beth exultantly.

"It's a clew, my dear Watson," laughed Steven *sotto voce*. "A real spook spark by wireless."

"In the spectre code?" queried Beth.

"That I can't explain yet," he returned, coming back hurriedly.

Greataunt Sarah and Nancy leaned out the door.

"Whatever have you discovered, Steven?" demanded Greataunt Sarah.

He held his big brown palm up for them to



ALEXANDER KEY

THE SOUND CAME LIGHTLY FROM THE CHEST

see. On it something lay like a wet drop of moonlight—of a marvellous reddish gold.

“It’s an old coin!” exclaimed Nancy. “A tarnished goldpiece, worn as thin as a wafer. And it’s such a deep, dusky red`gold——”

“As if it had been dipped in blood,” supplemented Blunder-Beth sepulchrally.

“It’s as big as a ‘cartwheel’,” pointed out Steven.

Greataunt Sarah picked up the lozenge of precious metal. She carried it to the drop-light and studied it through her glasses.

“It’s so worn, thin and dim that most of the characters have been burnished off with the passing of time. But see,” she discovered, “*Rex—— Ferdin——* The rest is buffed off, purposely or by chance, accident or what-not. Children, it’s Spanish gold—an old doubloon!”

“A Spanish doubloon!” exalted Blunder-Beth. “That’s pirate gold, buccaneer booty, sea-wasp treasure, pieces-of-eight, and all the rest——”

“The sign of the skull and cross-bones,” added Steven. “My eye! Pinch me to tell me if I’m awake!”

“However did it come here?” demanded Blunder-Beth, wide-eyed.

“Are there any other curio-collectors in the neighborhood?” queried Nancy eagerly.

“No.” Greataunt Sarah shook her head. “All the folk hereabouts have clung like leeches to the acres of their forefathers. They look with disfavor on foreign travel and curious relics of heathen lands. It’s all in the view-point, you know,” she ended tolerantly.

“Have there been any stray peddlers going from door to door lately?” questioned Steven, still staring in wide and joyous disbelief at the gleaming doubloon.

“No. I’ve given orders for the gates to be kept barred—since my veil disappeared so mysteriously. They have been flung wide only for those whom I know. As you recall, the switch is in the hall. Jenkins alone operates it. No, no foreign peddler has been in the grounds.”

“When did Peter, the gardener, last shear the grass around these piazza bushes?”

“Let me see,” the little old lady considered. “Why, it was the day before I first heard the knockings in the chest—the day before my veil disappeared. The grass doesn’t grow so rapidly now autumn approaches in seven-leagued boots. Yes, it was just the day before. And Peter is as honest as Diogenes. If he

found as much as a penny, he'd bring it to me instantly. I know that boy as I know my right hand."

"That proves," summarized Steven, "that this Spanish doubloon was *not* dropped before the mysterious happenings here. It must have been left, or lost, either when the veil disappeared—or *afterwards*."

"Are you quite sure," interrogated Nancy gently, "are you certain, Aunt Sarah, that you never have collected a Spanish doubloon in your travels, perhaps a long time ago, and then put it away and straightway forgotten about it?"

"Never," declared their aunt emphatically. "I've never been so fortunate. Time and again I've been on the trail of some old gold piece with a fascinating history, only to be disappointed. No, positively it's not mine."

"Has anyone visited you, been out on the piazza with you within the week?"

Miss Stanton considered carefully. "There's been only the electrician, and a few friends, none of whom could possibly have any excuse for carrying a Spanish doubloon around carelessly."

"Perhaps," suggested Nancy, "one of the

ladies may have worn the gold piece as a laval-liere——”

“I’d have noted it instantly,” countered their aunt. “Besides, look, there’s no hole in it, so it couldn’t have been strung around anyone’s throat.”

“Some one might have worn it secretly, or carried it as a luck-charm. He or she might have had a hole in the pocket and dropped it out.”

“But look where I found it!” reminded Steven. “In the middle of that clump of snow-ball bushes. And I only noticed it because it glistened in the moonlight. No one would be walking on the top terrace under the veranda rail. And it couldn’t have been lost off the veranda into it, because it spreads out too far——”

“I dislike to mention it,” acknowledged Greataunt Sarah. “But the only way it could get there would be by some one lurking or eavesdropping on the terrace. It commands a perfect view of the library here.”

“But,” spoke up Blunder-Beth, “no one you entertain would be guilty of such a thing! You can account for anyone who has been here within the week, because you have kept the gates locked.”

"There're still the servants," recalled Steven slowly.

"They're all as good as that gold there," defended Greataunt Sarah loyally. "Each and every one of them has been with me for years. I've put them on their honor, and like most people, they respond to trust. There isn't one of them who would be guilty of eavesdropping. I know. I'm certain."

Blunder-Beth smiled at her suddenly. She reached out and squeezed her hand.

"You're great, Aunt Sarah. Simply darling. Why, if I were one of your servants, I'd take off a finger before I'd disappoint you in anything."

Greataunt Sarah laughed into the earnest, eager face. She reached out and patted the soft, brown bob.

"Thank you, Elizabeth," she murmured.

Beth flushed with pleasure. Greataunt Sarah never addressed her as Elizabeth except when she was greatly pleased. It was like an unvoiced compliment from her—half-spoken praise.

"Well, that throws into the discard any sensible explanation of the doubloon's presence," frowned Steven. "It'll have to remain X in this riddle—for a time longer. You keep

it, Aunt Sarah, until we know where we're to find the solution."

"Now, you must all go to bed," declared their aunt briskly. "It's shamefully late—or early."

"Well, it's the early bird that gets the gold," paraphrased Blunder-Beth glibly.

"But it musn't turn to fool's gold! Shoo, all of you. Don't dare do any talking in the dark. Go to sleep at once, and don't come down until you're called. I'll instruct Jenkins. Good-night—and sweet dreams."

"The same to you and golden ones," they answered.

The shadows deepened over the great house. Finally its gnarled and weatherbeaten timbers lay wrapped in sleep, in silence, and in secret things.

.

They breakfasted at nine-thirty. But the Terrible Three experienced a guilty sense of extreme laziness. *Early to bed and early to rise* had been Grandmother Stanton's motto ever since they could toddle.

After breakfast they went onto the veranda. It was a wonderful morning, gleaming crisply under the autumn sun. Ravenswood lay behind a golden film where the sun filtered

through. The maples and the oaks sang in all the gorgeous tints of the spectrum.

They had hardly been on the veranda ten minutes before the dark and melancholy-looking Jenkins appeared in the library door. His manner was a shade less wooden than usual.

"Miss Stanton," he said in his precise, metallic way, "might I be so bold as to have a word with you?"

He stood waiting stiffly at attention.

Their aunt tripped in. The two withdrew to the farthest corner of the library, leaving the guests chattering like hungry magpies outside.

"Marm," began Jenkins in a fearful whisper, "there are queer goings-on here. Things you should know."

"What do you mean? Speak out, Jenkins."

The man fidgeted from one polished boot to the other. He brushed some invisible dust from the satiny sheen of his left arm. He threw back his shoulders as if straightening himself for some ordeal. Twice he cleared his throat as if his emotion had furred it too thickly for speech.

"I—I——" he began, "I've lost something. I'd sooner part with my skin than give it up. I'm that nervous and upset about it that

I haven't shut my eyes for these six nights. And I've looked everywhere before troubling you, marm, about it. Even now I'm ashamed to tell you—sorry to interrupt you with the young folk."

"No, no. You mustn't feel that way. I'm only too glad to hear and to help you, if I can. What is it?"

A half suspicion was forming in her mind concerning Jenkins' distress.

"You s-see, marm," he stuttered, both agitated and embarrassed, "I suspect you'll think I'm silly, but I hold to certain notions about things—signs, omens and the like. I'd rather break a leg than break a mirror. A leg will heal in a couple of months, but nothing can banish seven years of bad luck or a death. I'm trying to tell you, marm, that I'm superstitious. Of course I suspect it's foolish, but it was the way I was raised by my grand-dame. And I set a heap by her memory." His eyes grew suddenly misty.

Miss Stanton reached out and touched his sleeve gently. "I know. I understand. You don't need to apologize about how you feel."

"Well, her grandfather," he went on less diffidently, "was a sea-faring man. Somewhere, somehow he picked up a luck-piece.

And it was handed down to her, my grand-dame. She gave it to me when I was a little shaver, during her last illness. She told me it would bring me good luck always, and for me never to part with it. It has brought me good luck, serving such as you, marm, as I have for a spell of going on to ten years——”

“What was this luck-piece?”

“A Spanish gold-piece, marm, worn as thin as paper, what they call pirate’s gold and the like.”

Miss Stanton began to sense many things.

“And you’ve lost yours?” she urged him.

“Yes, marm. I lost it just a week ago, marm. I’d had it out late that night, looking it over close-like. And I’d left it on my wash-stand. Well, I’d a bit of headache in the night. So I went down the corridor of the third hall and out on the rear balcony for a whiff of night air. When I went back the goldpiece was gone. I searched everywhere in my clothes. But ’twas gone. I’ve peeked about quietly since. No use though.”

Like a flash the location of Jenkins’ room came to Miss Stanton’s mind. It was at the rear of the servants’ rooms on the third hall. There was no possible way to drop it from Jenkins’ window into the heart of the snow-

ball bush. The foliage outside the library veranda was on the south side of the house, the extreme south-west corner.

Miss Stanton went to a locked cabinet in the corner. She produced a key and turned the lock. She brought out the tiny wafer of gold and held it towards the perturbed Jenkins.

“Is this your lost luck-piece?”

A great glow of pleasure overspread Jenkins’ sober face. He stooped forward eagerly.

“Yes, marm. Yes, indeed. It’s mine.”

Quite simply she told him where Steven had discovered the gold doubloon.

“Its presence there is as much of a riddle to us as it is to you,” she finished.

Jenkins had been studying his recovered goldpiece eagerly.

“There are faint scratches on it that weren’t on it before,” he stated. “Not on the night I last saw it.” He pointed them out to her.

“Now, that’s a real clew,” she recognized. “I mustn’t lose sight of these scratches.”

Jenkins bowed and withdrew.

.

That night Blunder-Beth was aroused by a slight sound in the bushes outside her window. The last sickle of the waning moon fell faintly

on the great snow-ball blossoms in the bushes. As she looked, something like a wisp of fog-damp seemed to float slowly above the bush into the faint film of moonlight.

Slowly, surely, it traveled upward, seeming to spread into a wide, fanlike shape of palest sheen. It was like a stray wisp of cloud dropped from the very heavens above the bushes. Gradually the ghostly shape arose, mounted higher, until it disappeared in the heavy shadows of the tall pine.

"The wraith of Ravenswood," whispered Blunder-Beth to herself, tumbling into a heavy bathrobe and slippers. Her mind had been made up in a twinkling.

She raced across the heavy rug, opened the door and dashed along the corridor in the dark, and down the winding staircase. It took but the space of seconds to enter the library, unbar the door and step out upon the veranda.

Beth gazed upward, but the odd phantom had completely disappeared.

She dipped back into the library, pulled open a drawer in the table, and took Great-aunt Sarah's pocket-flash. She trooped down the veranda steps into the shade of the trees. She ran straight as a dart towards the shadows, playing her torch about eagerly. She

felt no sensation of fear. The grounds were as securely guarded as if surrounded by a moat and armed retainers. Besides, the riddle must admit of some simple, laughable explanation!

The girl raised her torch directly towards the tall evergreens where the floating white phantom had seemed to vanish.

Then she uttered a little, delighted *Ah*. The light quivered under her excited fingers.

There, snagged on a broken half-branch dangled a long, limp wisp of white. It was as thin and transparent as some spray of sea-foam. But there it was—Greataunt Sarah's lost Spanish mantilla, snared to a rotten branch on the tree!

Blunder-Beth raced back to the house. The great colonial clock stood at eleven only, for they had retired early. She went directly to Greataunt Sarah's room and aroused her. They in turn routed out Steven and Nancy. "For," declared Beth, "it isn't fair to answer the riddle without telling them at once."

Steven went to the gardener's lodge for a ladder. He climbed up the old pine and carefully extricated the snagged mantilla.

Suddenly, above him, the evergreen began to sway, although there wasn't a breath of

wind stirring. Something black swooped past him, over the heads of the three.

"There goes Jocko, my biggest raven!" exclaimed Greataunt Sarah. "He must have made a secret roost in the top of that tree."

"There's the answer to your riddle," declared Steven. "That explains everything but the knocking chest. Jocko is your prime pet. He's always pecking curiously about the house. He possesses all the thieving characteristics of the magpie. He probably saw your bright light in the library. There was no screen in the door. So he sailed in, glimpsed the glittering veil on the chest, grabbed it in his beak and swooped away with it, hiding it with his bird-wisdom where it then suited him to do so. To-night he returned to his prize, waiting to carry it to his cranny in the tree-top. That was what Beth saw when she beheld the veil ascending like a wisp of fog-damp into the shadows of the tree here. Jocko proved a poor pilot. He snagged the length of filmy tissue onto this rotten limb. So there's the answer to your vanished veil. The lost chest played no part in *it*——"

"But what about the spectral knocks we heard in the chest?" prompted Nancy. "There's still that riddle to solve."

"Let's go in and have another look at it," urged Steven.

"Now the significance of the scratches on the doubloon becomes easy of comprehension," reminded Greataunt Sarah.

"The marks of Jocko's bill, to be sure," laughed Blunder-Beth. "He probably took that too and dropped it. How simple now that we know!"

They re-entered the library.

"Aunt Sarah, may I connect a line from the floor socket to a high-power bulb, so I can carry it to the chest? It's a dark corner here, even under full daylight."

"Of course."

Shortly Steven played a 120-watt bulb over the carven sides of the chest.

"The front and the two ends, as well as the lid, are solidly carved pieces," he announced. "But the back fell in shadows, so I didn't study it so carefully. It's a magnificent piece of joinery. Look!"

He held the bulb close.

"Its two halves of wood are wonderfully glued together, so that only the faintest hair-line shows at one end under this chipped-off leaf. If an expert cabinet-maker could steam the back apart, we might discover something."

"Peter will do it in the morning. His father was a Swedish cabinet-maker. The lodge is full of the implements of the father's trade which the boy practices on the side. 'Twill be an easy matter for him to take that back apart."

So in the morning Peter's skilled fingers laid open the wonderful joining of that heavy carven back. Inside they found the wood rotten and honeycombed with tiny holes until it looked like two long sections of sponges. But that wasn't all!

Peter pointed out a boring object to them.

"There's the secret of your knocking chest," he told Miss Stanton. "Did you ever hear of the death-beetle? No? Well, the death-beetle inhabits certain bits of rotten wood. His boring progress is marked by faint, hollow tappings, like some tiny woodpecker in beetle form. They call him the death-beetle from an old superstition that whenever his faint tappings are heard, some member in the household is doomed. Just superstition, marm, you know," he ended apologetically.

"A death-beetle!" exclaimed Blunder-Beth. "Well, that's new to me!"

"To me, too," echoed their aunt quickly. "Thanks to Peter's clever operation."



PETER HELD UP SATINY SPHERES OF WHITE

"B-but——" protested Beth disappointedly. "The Italian boy said that the chest was a treasure, more than its outsides seemed to show——"

Peter looked up from his careful poking among the spongy holes and the sawdust.

"The Italian boy was right," he stated, his voice a husky whisper. "See, what was hidden away between the two glued halves of the carven back. Look! Some one, some early Italian, bored holes into the surface of both halves before they were glued back again. Into these holes were hidden these——"

On his palm Peter held up satiny spheres of white.

"Pearls!" exclaimed Greataunt Sarah. "Magnificent pearls."

She examined them critically.

"Enough for a string to go around a lady's neck," added Peter.

"How very odd!" recognized Greataunt Sarah. "I looked into the history of that vanished daughter of the Medicis. Tradition avers that she owned one of the finest strings of matched pearls in Europe at the time. The pearls disappeared when she did. I had all but forgotten this fact."

"How very fascinating!" added Nancy.

“It’s easy now to piece out in imagination the true explanation of the girl’s disappearance. Some one wanted the pearls. Something terrible may have happened. Then, the pearls were temporarily secreted in the back of the old Florentine chest. Some one pried apart or steamed open the two halves, bored the holes, hid the pearls and then glued the back together again.”

“Well, the Dukes de Medici were consummate rogues, skilled in many crafts,” recalled Greataunt Sarah. “It was a feat not beneath them, and better than they usually practiced. For they were both a credit and a great blot on the early history of Italy.”

“Thus endeth the Riddle of Ravenswood,” completed Steven with a flourish. “The little cripple spoke truly. I wonder if he really knew anything of its true secret! Or if he meant something else?”

“That time alone will tell us,” laughed their aunt. “I shall return these pearls to the museum at Florence, along with the tale of how we discovered them. It will make a fascinating story for some antiquarian to unravel.”

THE ENIGMA OF EEL GRASS BAY

“Then,” finished Sally Comfort, “I was that scuttled full o’ shivers, that I locked up the house tighter’n a clam-shell, and scurried out like a scared ’possum. ’Tain’t nateral, Mis’ Stanton—*moaning* eel-grass! And the water’s that deep and full o’ black muck thereabouts that anything’d sink quicker’n takes to sniff at the notion.”

Blunder-Beth stared at their visitor with round, fascinated eyes. She had walked the eight mile stretch between her little cottage on Eel Grass Bay and their summer house on the turnpike.

“Steven,” went on Sally Comfort, nodding to the boy, “won’t you please shut that ’ere door there? Every draught starts the roots of my hair to sprouting. I’m that quivering queasy.”

Steven closed the door.

“Let me give you a cup of hot coffee,” suggested Nancy sympathetically. “It will chase away some of the shivers for you. You won’t have to pass another such restless, scary night there.”

"Sakes a mercy, I hope not," wheezed Sally Comfort. "I'm 'bout petered out to a shoe-string. 'Twas mighty kind of you, Mis' Stanton, a-lending me that 'ere house of yours for my little rest. But I guess I'd rather come back and go to work. Housework ain't much shucks, but at least it don't start a body's wisdom teeth a-clattering——"

Grandmother Stanton held up a protesting hand.

"Now, now, Sally," she demurred, "don't give up so easily. You've hardly been down there two days. The vacation will do you good. Steven, Nancy and Beth will go back with you. They're a terrible trio, you know, for solving the weird, the strange, and the mysterious."

"My eye!" exclaimed Steven. "Moaning eel grass! Sounds like burning ice and all the other impossibles."

"Sounds like a rip-snorting mystery," declared Blunder-Beth gleefully.

"Or phantom groans," supplemented Nancy.

"Steven," suggested Grandmother Stanton, "suppose you whisk out your Pilot car. I know there's an old dory tied to the pier there. The last cottager brought it from the shed and left it moored in the water to keep it fit. I want to learn what lies behind this mystery

while the sun's high. The eel grass in the bay is notably dangerous, heavy and thick——”

“And said to run to eels big as boa constrictors,” cut in Blunder-Beth with a delighted shiver.

“And to be impenetrable,” recalled Nancy. “If a person gets lost in there, he is likely to flounder into all manner of trouble—regular everglades, quagmires and the like.”

“I fancy,” their grandmother told them, “that it's a case of ‘give a dog a bad name.’ To be sure, the bay is covered with a five mile stretch of impenetrable, high-growing grass. It has always been shunned, much as one would avoid swamps and quicksands. So it has gathered an unsavory reputation hereabouts. The black muck must be very thick and rich for such a luxuriant growth to cover the bay there. You must be very careful. That old dory is a regular tub for safety—impossible to upset. Take along an extra pair of oars and a couple of long poles. You must work out some scheme for finding your way back. It will do you good to ferret out this mystery for yourselves. I have every faith that you'll use common sense and resourcefulness. Now—travel along.”

.

Eel Grass Bay uncoiled its thousands of burnished grass blades against the summer sky. The bay appeared more like a restless cornfield than a shallop of the sea. Squatting on a sandy indentation stood a rough shack. Yet there was an air of tidiness about the place.

As the car took the swooping sandy road at a merry pace, a tall, angular man peered at its occupants from the rear of the shack. He ducked from sight like a prairie dog. A bristling, yellow cur raced out. He reared himself on stiff legs like a saw-horse and shattered the silence with his yaps as the car dipped into the next hollow of the road.

"There's that 'ere hermit again," offered Sally Comfort. "I've done nothing but shunt away from the gossip hereabouts. But the tales they do tell! Sakes a mercy! His name is Owen Knight. And they do 'low that for all its down-at-the-heels out'ards, the in'ards of his shack is real scrumptious—iligint-like. For a lone hermit, he has loads of money, they do tell——"

Gently Nancy interposed, "Perhaps Eel Grass Bay lends itself to idle rumor. But it looks commonplace enough by day."

"But by *night* — ugh!" shivered Sally.

"Looks be downright deceptious, I'm a-tellin' you."

"It is odd that the moans don't come in the daytime," agreed Nancy.

"Sure sign it's a ghost!" Blunder-Beth wagged her head like some weather-beaten old wiseacre. "Who ever heard of ghosts moaning in broad daylight! They feed on darkness."

"It's going to be some proposition to row about in a scow," debated Steven. . . . "Funny how that bay's shunned. It's a regular second Sargasso, a kind of graveyard of black muck, big eels and a bad reputation."

Nancy added, "Well, nobody'd be keen for exploring around in such a place on a pleasure jaunt."

"But 'twould be a fine hiding-place if anybody were looking for one," deposed Blunder-Beth hopefully. "Maybe it's full of——"

"Madcap ideas," put in Steven, "such as you unreel by the yard, Beth. Heigho! There's the cottage, snug as you please. And here we are with a quota of good hours till dusk to lay Sally Comfort's groaning ghost."

The maid turned to him. "Ain't no ghosts by daylight, I tell you," she reaffirmed. "No groans neither. You'll have your work for

your pains. Whatever's a-going on in that 'ere eel grass only happens o' nights."

"Then we'll plan to spend the night out," decided Steven.

"You can count me out," declared Sally. "My old body's had ague enough without nosin' about in that 'ere bay."

Steven slowed down beside the little cottage.

"Now, we have just two electric torches. How many lanterns can you find for us?"

"Two. Kerosene lanterns, protected 'gainst draughts. Got reflectors, too, all polished like nuggets for backin' up the lights. One of them lanterns' worth ten of your new-fandangled torchlights. They're always going bad, like a spoiled child, just when you want 'em to behave their purtiest."

"It'll be no end of a lark," anticipated Steven. "Tonight there's still the full moon. That will help us."

"W-wh-what about a g-gun?" stammered Blunder-Beth, her tongue as unruly as ever when driven by sudden excitement. "S-su-sup-suppose there's smugglers there or we s-s-stumble upon some t-t-treasure!"

"Beth is romancing," laughed Nancy. "She has been reading the life of Captain Kidd lately."

"Not Captain Kidd," admitted Beth. "Robin Hood. But nothing ever happens like that nowadays——"

" 'Oh, my name was Captain Kidd, when
I sailed, when I sailed,
Oh, my name was Captain Kidd when I
sailed——' "

chanted Steven, ending up with a sepulchral,

" 'Fifteen men on the dead man's chest,
With a yo-ho, yo-ho——' "

"Oh, Master Steven," interposed Sally Comfort, grasping the car's tonneau door. "Where under the light o' day do you pick up such heathen jargon! Enough to make a body turn green—dead men, chests, and such like."

"You mustn't mind Steven, you know," soothed Nancy. "His teasing is worse than his words. Just at present, I suspect that Beth isn't the *only* one who's been reading pirate stories."

"Here we are," invited Steven blithely, skipping the subject. "All aboard for Eel Grass Bay. 'Under the grass in the murky waters, where they've kept me for years'," he laughed tantalizingly at Sally Comfort.

"Oh, you wicked boy," smiled Sally ruefully. "If you weren't a good four inches taller than me, I'd spank you, just as I did

when you were a troublesome tad in torn trousers."

Steven clicked his heels together and made a polite bow.

"Alight, oh generous lady," he said with mock civility. "Shall I spread my Norfolk for you to tread upon?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Steven," admonished Nancy, with a twinkle in her eye—for he *was* humorous.

Sally Comfort led the way to the rear door.

.

Ruefully Beth and Steven glanced backward. The sun poured down a vertical glare. Eel Grass Bay danced under glimmering grass-blades until it thrust into the bronze-green corselet of the sea. Nancy and Sally Comfort waved them a good-bye from the doorway. Sally had insisted upon Nancy's staying with her. So Beth and Steven clambered into the flat, old dory. They were weighed down with the accessories for the adventure—enough to spend the night out if necessary.

Steven had ground down to a razor edge the sickle from the shed.

"Now, Beth," he began briskly, "let's make

you all shipshape here in the prow. We'll have to thread a snail's pace."

"Looks like a wild goose chase, Steven. But I'm *it* if you say so. I'll slice away at the grass as long as my elbow holds out. Then I'll relieve you at the oars. Heigho! I don't like this hunting a needle in the eel-grass—for that's what it really amounts to. Why not wait till dark, Steven, and then be guided by the moans?"

"We've thrashed that out already," demurred Steven. "As we've now decided, we're just going to explore a little for any sign of recent disturbance of the grass—any clues——"

He shoved off. Slowly the boat slithered down into the inky waters. With a long swish of her right arm Beth began to cut a swath for the dory through the tall grass. The scow crawled along—disappeared in the waving blades.

"Not so close, Beth," suggested Steven after a time. "This Old Ironsides will press it down with its weight and our own. You don't have to cut the grass much below the height of the boat."

"Aye, aye, sir," answered Blunder-Beth promptly, with another swooping gesture.

"Ouch! The skin of my palm is blistered already!"

"Tender-foot!" reproved Steven. "And we've only about started!"

"Wait a minute! I'll wind my handkerchief around my hand for a pad, and take to the oars for a spell. Suppose you turn mowing-machine, Steve."

They exchanged places. Standing upright in the old scow only their heads and shoulders showed above the giant growth of grass. Seated, they were completely concealed.

"She certainly rides easy," commented Steven. "Couldn't rock this boat if we wanted to. It's fool-proof."

"I—don't—*know*," smiled Blunder-Beth wryly.

"All right, super-cargo. My, but this sickle lays the grass like a razor! You grabbed it too hard, Beth. Regular limousine-and-orchid job, if you take it right."

Steven directed the course by his compass and the sun. He was cutting a straight course seaward. Sally Comfort had insisted that the moans came from the middle of the bay. The information might have meant much or little. Sounds on the water are difficult to place correctly.

For an hour they edged along, with only the silken swish of Steven's sickle, seconded by the low gulp of Beth's dipping oars, to sever the stillness.

"Just a moment," requested Steven.

Somewhat surreptitiously he dug into his right trousers' pocket. He brought out a begrimed handkerchief and dabbed at his forehead. But the handkerchief was not returned to the pocket. Awkwardly he tried to wad it into his right palm.

"Yaho, my hearty," discovered Beth with a smile. "Why the bumper on the starboard palm? What-ho the upholstery? Art shedding *thy* skin already?"

Steven grinned back sheepishly over his shoulder.

"Queen Elizabeth, there's no compliment like imitation. I've a blister as big as a cart-wheel adorning the exact center of my palm. Hence the upholstery."

"Too bad. We're not tender-footed, but tender-handed."

"Hello!" called out Steven, stopping suddenly. "Look, Beth! Of all things!"

"Why, it's another trail, blazed through the grass!"

"It is. And an old one, too. See the stumps of the grass are brown and worn——"

"But it's been recently used, Steven. See how it's kept chewed close to the water's edge."

"Quick eye," acceded Steven. "Let's enter it in a hurry and see where it goes. I'll take the oars, Beth."

"No indeed. You keep on a-sitting in the lookout nest. Mind that your spy-glasses are wiped clean."

"I'll watch. Never fear."

Under the urge of this new excitement Blunder-Beth sent the dory forward at a plucky pace. The trail took a devious course, shuttling in and out at oblique angles. Now it doubled back on its trail; now it glanced off into a new, bewildering course.

"A regular maze," recognized Blunder-Beth. "Why all the plane geometry—a problem in angles?"

"Precaution," declared Steven. "A trail shuttling through at so many acute angles would not only be invisible from the main, but even in the midst of the bay. It was only by lucky accident that our path struck this one."

"It's dipping back towards the main again," murmured Beth, standing up. "We're half

way between Sally Comfort's and the hermit's."

"Land ahoy!" exclaimed Steven suddenly. "Look ahead, Beth."

"We're coming into a cleared space, an oasis of water surrounded by grass."

"And look! There's a raft in the middle of it, moored to the muck."

"Th-th-there's s-something on the raft. It's alive. It's in that b-bunch of burlap and rags."

"It's a dog," recognized Steven in his biggest brother tone. "It might be the hermit's dog—or a first cousin to him. But all curs look alike to me."

The yellow cur now caught a whiff of them, for the grass had previously flung their cautious whispers away. The little animal reared himself. He watched them suspiciously, with bristling, wire-stiff hair. But he was muzzled, tightly muzzled.

"Now, that explains *that*," commented Blunder-Beth. "There's Sally's moans walking about on four feet—muzzled—or I'm a ghost myself."

"But the little beggar isn't hungry. He's so fat his back's all marcelled in wrinkles. Some one's left him a soft bed. Why the muzzle?"

"Stupid!" exclaimed Beth with feigned

superiority. "To keep him from barking, of course, thereby revealing his presence and drawing attention to Eel Grass Bay."

"Probably he tried to bark at the moon. It was full two nights ago," recalled Steven. "So the best the little rascal could give out was moans. If we're not mistaken Sally Comfort's ghost is a four-footed one."

They now drew up alongside of the raft. It was crudely made. Except for the pile of burlap and the muzzled cur there was little to be seen at first glance.

The incorrigible Blunder-Beth stepped aboard the swaying raft.

"Funny!" Steven heard her say. She was stooping about, picking up something.

"Treasure?" he demanded eagerly.

"*Clews*," she answer laconically.

She held out a brown palm. Three bits of red gleamed ruddily there.

"Flannel, red flannel! What on earth has this secretly moored craft, guarded by a muzzled cur, got to do with pieces of red flannel——"

"Carefully cut, too, you'll notice," pointed out Blunder-Beth.

She stowed them away in her blouse pocket. They searched about further. But there wasn't another thing to be discovered.

“Why,” wailed Beth disappointedly, “should anyone blaze such a crazy approach through the grass, with every attempt for concealment to hide—*this?*” she ended scornfully.

“It’s more of a riddle than it appears on the surface. Somebody’s playing safe—for some hidden purpose.”

“Plain silly, I should say, with a muzzled dog on guard. Why not a dehorned bull or a fangless rattler!”

“Let’s get back to a spot well inland, where we can secretly watch what will go on after dark. We’ll drive the dory in at an angle off this fellow’s trail. We’ll see who goes there—and why.”

They found an excellent hiding-spot where they could peer through without being seen, even if a cautious flare were used by the owner of the raft. The sun dipped down over the straight edge of the sea. The waters deepened to a puddle of ink, and the heavens became a wash of Prussian blue, pricked with spangles. Eel Grass Bay idly thrust and parried the wind with rapierlike blades encased in the black velvet scabbards of darkness. The occasional rusty squawk of a gull was mocked in-shore by some jealous land-fowl. Then quiet fell, a soft, swaying stillness, with the moon

edging up like a gilt wafer. Eel Grass Bay changed to a field of fixed bayonets, under the brandishing brightness.

Steven and Beth ate their lunch. They felt somewhat stiff, but there was no cramp to their eagerness. They were all eyes and ears.

Time slipped by. The moon climbed jauntily upward, like a golden balloon, drawn by some invisible thread.

Suddenly Blunder-Beth put her finger on her lips. They listened breathlessly. There came the faintest swish of oars. Then a boat poked about a bend. The figure of a man squatted between the oarlocks. A black slouch hat was pulled low over his face. He was bent forward, so that his identity was completely hidden.

On came the boat, noiselessly, swiftly. It swished past the peering two, then disappeared around another angle. Silence reigned once more.

"We'll wait until he comes back," captioned Steven. "Then we'll follow him at a safe distance. It will be easy, there are so many bends in this trail."

"Su-sup-suppose he should hear us? He might take us back to the raft, and make us walk the plank——"

"Or muzzle us," ended Steven with the hint

of a laugh. "Don't worry. I'll take the oars. And I'll muffle them so that even the ghost of old Massasoit himself couldn't hear as much as the splash of my paddle."

They waited. It seemed an age. But time always lags under excitement. As a matter of fact, the man in the slouch hat was unusually speedy.

"He's coming back, and I'm no Massasoit," whispered Blunder-Beth. "Why didn't the dog groan?"

The stranger's boat came into sight.

"He has the dog with him. That's why there'll be no ghost groans slated for tonight. Sally should sleep in peace."

With the same steady, business-like strokes the boat came around a bend in the grass. Cautiously Steven took his oars. More carefully still he dipped them. He paddled along with great dexterity.

Finally, ahead they heard a dull crunching. The stranger had beached his boat. Steven and Beth nosed around the last bend in the grass. The man in the slouch hat was lifting something. It was a square, black object like a chest or box. It appeared to be covered with some old cloth or canvas. He removed it with great care from the boat and bore it across the sandy road to a waiting, darkened auto. With



THEN A BOAT POKED ABOUT A BEND

a grunt he raised the covered box to the seat and pulled the covering down over it. Hastily he glanced up and down the road.

Then Beth, who had been leaning forward, lost her balance. She scuttled into the bottom of the old scow with a faint, but audible thud.

Steven all but groaned. But Beth was playing true to form. If it had been Nancy now, demure, cautious Nancy——

The dog in the boat began to growl ominously. His ears had detected what the man at the car had missed—the sound of Beth's fall in the scow.

Swiftly Steven drove the boat into a thin patch of eel grass. He edged it to a landing spot some fifty feet below where the dog and the boat lay beached. He helped Beth ashore into a bunch of junipers. The bushes cast thick shadows.

The man ran across the road, down to the boat. He talked in low tones to the dog.

“Now's your time, Steven,” urged Beth. “Skip across the gully in the road. Peek into that box and see what he has.”

Steven went. Beth was a veritable Queen Beth, and not to be disobeyed.

Anxiously she watched him, even as she kept an eye on the stranger. He was hiding his boat under an overhanging bank. Fortu-

nately he had attached a leash to the dog's collar.

Beth saw Steven disappear in the shadows of the lightless car. Then her heart catapulted into her mouth. The stranger, accompanied by the dog, was crossing the sandy road to the darkened motor. Where was Steven? What could he be doing? Why didn't he come back?

Both man and dog disappeared into the darkness. There followed a silence that was filled with shivers for Beth. She heard a metallic clank, clank, clank, then the sound of a wheeze and a few sputtering hiccoughs. Next came a thunderous sound as the man cranked the car.

Blunder-Beth gulped with thankfulness. The roar of the engine increased. There was a grinding of gears, a crunching of sand. The sound diminished, and the car started away.

Then she jumped. For Steven had stolen up without her observing him. He stood at her elbow. Then he brought out his pocket flash. But all the while he kept a hand hidden in his left pocket.

"I've brought the evidence," he stated.

Then he produced the most enormous frog Blunder-Beth had ever seen, and quite the most lively.

"It's the grand-dad of all frogs. It's the

hermit, all right. He has a box full of all the other grand-dad frogs that have lived in Eel Grass Bay since the Creation—if size counts for anything.”

“A box of frogs! Whatever——”

Steven grinned broadly. “Greenbacks,” he told her, “from the mud of the bay. Real greenbacks, too—later to be changed into paper ones. Don’t you realize it? He’s captured a corner on the finest frog-legs hereabouts. Probably sells them like hot cakes to the markets and hotels for that good dish *Fried Frogs’ Legs*. And he must get a pretty penny for the bunch too. Hence all the secrecy about his movements, lest some one else discover his secret storehouse—and become a competitor in a mighty profitable business.”

“But the bits of red flannel on the raft?” recalled Blunder-Beth.

“That’s how he catches them. Nothing like red flannel for baiting frogs. I was a double-headed dumbbell not to hook that clue on sight!”

“Well, there *was* a treasure in the eel grass after all.”

“Yes, indeed,” agreed Steven. “A living, lively cache of greenbacks.”

THE HOUSE OF THE HAUNT

PART I

THE HOUSE

“If I s-swallow much more salt water, I w-will b-be p-pickled,” gulped Blunder-Beth as she continued her valiant bailing.

“Some one roll *me* over a barrel,” suggested Steven. “I’m a regular brine-keg myself.”

Followed a dull crunching. The *Blunder-Beth* shivered from bow to stern, rocked, and then came to a sudden, shuddering stop.

Beth sprawled on all-fours. The pail clanked along the pebbled, rocky inlet, and disappeared from sight, snuffed out by the blackness. The spray bit their faces as sharply as flint; their soggy clothes flapped against them.

Beth got up, flung back the wet mop which had replaced her unruly bob.

Nancy stepped primly over an oarlock into the darkness.

“Oh, I say,” protested Steven, vaulting after her. “Let me go ahead. No place for you!”

Nancy’s voice came back to them. It

sounded unusually eerie, like some fantastic echo. The night swallowed her like some clever sleight-of-hand trick.

"It's a place for eyes, Steven," she reminded him demurely. "Your horny rimmed ones ducked from sight when the big wave lashed the *Blunder-Beth*."

"G-ghost Island," shivered Beth, as she floundered in the rear of the two bodiless voices. "Ghost Island—and a boat without a rudder! S'bad! But a Steven without goggles—that's worse! Glad we came though," she declared courageously, as her wet clothes slapped at her like clammy, clutching hands. "Which way have you gone? My eyes are full of the blackness."

"Land ahoy! Three points starboard," signalled Steven from the shadows. "Tread warily, Queen Beth. You may run athwart a ghost!"

Beth heard Nancy's protesting, "Shh! She's already too full of shivers. . . . Which way is the house supposed to be located, Steve? Do you know anything about the geography of this island?"

"Nothing except that it runs to ghosts. And they haven't given me their addresses," he ended facetiously. "My eye, but it is dark and

clammy! Some of the water's evaporating. It's being replaced by a seven-course hunger."

"—which will have to be satisfied largely by air," reminded Nancy. "The wave that lopped off the *Blunder-Beth's* rudder licked away most of our own belongings likewise."

"Nearly everything's gone," agreed Steven. "Presto! Just like that!"

Blunder-Beth came panting up behind them.

"I r-read somewhere," she recalled, "that when you g-go g-ghost-hunting, you should c-carry m-matches in a dry place. Here, take this, Steven, please."

"My word, Mother Robinson! If she hasn't dry matches done up in oil-silk!"

"If I'd had any sense, I'd have done myself up in it too!"

Beth sniffed disgustedly at the darkness and the roaring surf beyond.

"I think we are in for adventure all right," laughed Nancy quietly.

"Was there ever a better setting?" gleefully anticipated Beth.

"Not in a month of moons," cheerfully acceded Steven.

Dry matches had largely restored his confidence in the mad-cap adventure on which they had embarked.

Grandmother Stanton declared that there was just about as much sense to ghost-hunting as there was to jousting windmills à la Don Quixote. But since she pooh-poohed wraiths and all kindred spectral tales concerning them, she had reluctantly agreed that a night at Ghost House could do them little harm, other than intruding on their slumbers. And Grandmother Stanton was far too wise to set stumbling-blocks in the way of the Irrepressible Three when the trio had their hearts set on solving some deep, dark mystery.

Besides, the owner of the island, an old man who lived at the village inn, was unable to offer any reasonable explanation for the curious happenings which made up the sinister tales persistently encircling Ghost House. The little island property without its unsavory, haunted heritage would have made an admirable summer-place for anyone with "half an eye to beauty," as Blunder-Beth expressed it. But each summer produced the same sorry tale of frightened, disgruntled tenants, who speedily fled the place as though it were accursed; a sorry history indeed for a once attractive house now fast falling to age and uselessness through its hapless reputation.

"Yessir," Mr. Hepplewhite, the owner, had

declared, thumping the floor roundly with his gold-headed cane, "yes siree, sir, I call it all balderdash myself. Or I did so, until one lone night I tried staying there. Three hours were quite enough for me—right on my own property too. There *are* queer goings-on there, and that's no hearsay. Saw the ghost myself, right before my very eyes. Let fly this heavy cane right straight into the thing! Not a single sound! Will you believe it, soon's the cane whacked to the floor, the thing still floated there, a death's-head, as pert as you please. My cane went right through it, too.

"'Twas enough for me. I called the boy who had brought me over, sent him in for the cane, and came back that night, scared out of my own property. Since then I've tried to sell the place. No one would have it for a song. Leased it at regular starvation rates because of the ghost. Had to refund the money, too, even when I'd told the tenants in advance all about the ghost! And I'm really meaning it when I say I'd sell that house or exchange it for a flivver, I'm feeling that strong on the subject. It's a white elephant, a ghost is, on anybody's hands. I'd rather have the elephant myself. Could sell *it* to a zoo. What can a body do with a haunted

house—and an honest-to-goodness ghost, that leers at you as impudent as you please, though it's been flung at, shot at, and fled from!”

Blunder-Beth had taken him up.

“Suppose we solve the mystery for you, Mr. Hepplewhite. The place would be worth something then, wouldn't it?”

“'Twould be paying property,” admitted the old man. “And, truth to tell, I need it.”

“Then you wouldn't object to our trying to lay the ghost?” persisted Blunder-Beth.

“Object!” he exploded. “Why, you could have a month's vacation there every summer, just as a sample of my gratitude.”

“Oh, of course we couldn't accept that,” protested Beth. “We just want your permission to see what we can see. The fun of trying to solve the mystery would be quite enough.”

“You go right ahead,” encouraged the old man. But he shook his head dolefully. “Don't believe Mis' Stanton would be very anxious to let you youngsters loose in a place like that. Wouldn't blame her none. Still, if she says yes, it's a go. Watch out there, though. There's something queer afoot. 'Tisn't natural either, a thing a body can't explain, though he can see it with his own eyes.”

“Perhaps,” Nancy had suggested, “there’s some unfortunate tale hinging on the old place. Is there now?”

“Let me see,” slowly recollected Mr. Hepplewhite. “It hasn’t much of a pedigree, the old house. Built not more than a stretch of thirty years ago. But it’s evidently seen enough even in its short life—enough of scared people. . . . It’s strange to me that only since I bought the island property has the house been haunted. That’s what I can’t understand. Looks as if the spooks had a grudge against me. . . . As for the house itself, there’s a story that the first owner, an artist by the name of Long, who bought the island property, disappeared suddenly. He died intestate—that is, with no heirs. It took the usual length of time before the state could offer the property for sale. Somehow people have never remained long, either as owners or tenants. Idle superstition, perhaps. But there are enough who claim that unfortunate deeds cling to a house, even as they do to a person.

“Anyhow, that artist-chap was never heard of or seen since that day twenty-nine years ago when he rowed himself over to his island estate, anchored his boat, and disappeared for

all time. They found the boat as he had evidently left it. Everything in the house was in first class order. Even the paint was still wet on the canvas of a drawing he was making. They said he was right handy with the paint brush. . . . The sheriff and his posse made every kind of a search. They even blasted the water round about the island to see if he had been accidentally drowned. He was an expert swimmer, too. Not a thing could be learned. The island might have opened up and swallowed him."

"Mr. Hepplewhite," asked Blunder-Beth, "how do you know so much about the story, please? It's strange Grandmother Stanton never told us."

The old man smiled whimsically. "Perhaps your grandmother dislikes tales suggesting possible violence. . . . I learned the facts from the reports of a coroner's jury which met in this county at the time. The papers are on file in the county seat. Indeed, I looked into the matter very painstakingly when these ghost tales began to pop up."

"Odd thing," commented Steven. "Seems as if someone had some unjust enmity against you, Mr. Hepplewhite. Now doesn't it, sir?"

"I've been regretfully coming to that conclusion," admitted the old man. "Yet I con-

fess I fail to see how I could have offended anyone. Of course, I'm rather a crusty old curmudgeon, and my gout does make me mighty unpleasant at times, I fear. But I've never deliberately done an act to harm anybody."

"Of course not," intervened Nancy swiftly.

The old gentleman's neck was becoming an apoplectic red. He kept moving his right leg, as though the pain in his joints were penetrating his patience.

"What of the island itself?" demanded Blunder Beth suddenly. "I'd like to know something about that island."

The old man looked at her sharply.

"And what should there be to know?" he queried.

Blunder Beth squinted down at the lone freckle at the end of her short nose. She made a ludicrous picture as she sat there.

"I don't know," she temporized. "I—don't—know."

"Beth's romancing again," hastened Nancy. "She's always jumping to the most extraordinary conclusions, once her imagination has its trend between her thoughts."

The old man smiled mechanically as he got up.

"Well, imagination's a good thing, I'm not

denying it. But within bounds — within bounds. Perhaps that poor artist-chap paid for an overshare of imagination.”

Blunder Beth still squinted at the freckle at the end of her nose. Her eyes were half shut. For once she refrained from any reply.

“Good luck to you,” called out Mr. Hepplewhite, starting towards the door.

He stopped suddenly before a drawing table in a corner. There were crayons scattered about, and a hazy sketch. He frowned down.

“Who’s the pastelle artist here?” he asked. “But I think I know.”

He glanced over his glasses at Blunder-Beth.

“Oh, no,” she denied quickly. “I couldn’t sketch anything even if some one held my hand. Nancy’s the artist here.”

Mr. Hepplewhite thumped out.

“My clothes weigh half a ton,” exaggerated Blunder-Beth. “I must stop and squeeze some of the moisture out, or I shall be water-logged.”

“Good idea!” commented Steven. “You and Nancy stay here while I scout about. It’s beginning to rain again, worse luck! We’ve matches, but nothing dry enough for a torch.”

“Speak for yourself, Steven,” laughed

Beth, pulling out another length of oilsilk from the front of her blouse.

“My eye! What else have you hidden away? You’re a regular storehouse.”

“You’ll see. This packet holds half a dozen slim but dependable spermaceti candles. They’re fashioned with a hard twisted wick guaranteed to burn long and lustily.”

“You had all these things in the boat until they bolted with the big wave. . . .”

“No, I didn’t foresee any big wave. I was moved by purely selfish motives. I intended to do a little lone scouting without calling on any of the company’s accessories. . . . But now, you see, I nobly dedicate them to the common cause.”

Beth swept Steven a dripping, swishing bow.

“Noble lady,” quoth he, “my humble, grateful huzzas in ye name of ye company.”

“Arise, Sir Torchbearer.”

“Beth!” deplored Nancy. “Will you ever be serious in an emergency? When we have the night before us, a haunted house, a lonely island, and plenty of sooty darkness——”

“Nay, plaintive maiden,” replied Blunder-Beth. “Nary a sober look—till I behold yon shivering ghost.”

Despite their chattering the girls had suc-

ceeding in wringing out some of the surplus wet from their water-soaked clothing. Steven waited a bit impatiently, his eyes straining away in the darkness.

"How shall we find the house?" crisply demanded Nancy. "We'll be circling about it for hours. With this wind and rain even dry matches and candles will be lost."

"Follow me!" suddenly ordered Beth. "I know the way. You see, I've studied the island. Just walk after me for half a dozen paces. What do you notice, even in the darkness?"

"An upward slope," recognized Steven. "But it tells me nothing."

"That's because you don't talk the island tongue," flung back Blunder Beth. "You see, it's fashioned something like a short cone. In other words, it's an upright carrot, cleanly chopped off at the top by the perpetual action of the waves——"

"And the house——?" breathlessly intercepted Nancy.

"The house squats on the top. It's as neat as you please. All we have to do is to continue climbing up in the darkness, following our toes, instead of our nose."

“Beth’s holding out on us,” declared Steven. “She’s full of withheld information.”

“Nothing but imagination. I’ve brought nothing else except a bottle of waterproof drawing ink from Nancy’s table.”

“Whatever do you plan to do with waterproof ink?” asked Nancy.

“*You’ll* do that,” answered Beth. “I thought we might need a sketch of the place.”

Sometimes they didn’t follow the veering-stick of Beth’s will-o’-the-wisp wanderings. As Grandmother Stanton phrased it, “Beth possessed a positive genius for blundering into trouble or into some carefully concealed mystery.” Sometimes it was mere coincidence; again it was some slight straw which set her mind along the right lane of travel. Besides Beth still believed in mystery as a glamorous, every-day possibility, if one had but the eyes to discern.

Steven’s essential hard-headedness and Nancy’s gentle detachment in no wise discouraged Beth. If the dark, boarded house over the way, squatting in its somber setting of pines, failed to produce an intriguing, black history, she would wander on to a likelier environment, her enthusiasm no whit blunted. Beth belonged to some past age of clanking

glamor and misty unreality. The twentieth century blare of dream-dispelling saxophones, loud horns and hurly-burly might have been downright disillusioning to less of an optimist and a dreamer. If, in more than one instance some fascinating tale Beth had woven out of the sheer gossamer of some odd incident, failed to materialize, she would declare, "Well, it might have been," and not let the matter disturb her any further.

"Uh!" 'Twas Beth's voice speaking from the right. "I've run into something!"

"You should have sounded your horn," protested Steven.

"I-it's a p-post with a bald head."

"An entrance post, ornamented by a stone sphere," elaborated Steven.

"F-feels just like a d-death's head," stut-tered Blunder-Beth.

"Come on," urged the boy. "We're on the property. The walk's defined by sunken, broken bricks. Let's creep along before the next blast of wind propels us."

Steven led the way, with Nancy gripping the edge of his sweater. Blunder-Beth trailed along in the rear, sniffing at the damp, musty odor which now began to replace the tang of the ocean.

“Smells old—and clammy, like a tomb,” she averred.

“I shall be glad to escape from the wind and the wetness,” admitted Nancy, as she endeavored to dodge Steven’s heels in the darkness.

The boy stopped suddenly. Nancy collided. Blunder-Beth went down to her knees on the slimy stones.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “It’s the wide stone step. I didn’t expect the house so soon. Just a moment now and I’ll go in.”

“Perhaps it’s locked,” suggested Nancy. “What then?”

“Mr. Hepplewhite gave me the key.”

They heard him fumbling in the darkness. They might have stood with bandaged eyes. There was a click, a dull, protesting squeak, then a rush of dank air.

“Just a moment,” he called out cheerily.

Behind the partially opened door followed a quick scratching. A light flickered fitfully. The draught speedily extinguished it. Again Steven struck, this time more warily. Beth’s candle finally sputtered, stabbing the darkness with spasmodic blades of light along the edge of the yawning door.

Blunder-Beth went in hurriedly, closely

followed by Nancy. They shut the door. Steven took the precaution of locking it, leaving the key in the keyhole.

"It'll be safer there," he declared. "It will also serve to forestall any practical joker, who may possess a duplicate key."

They turned now to study this house which had acquired so ill a reputation through the inexplicable occurrences that had hovered over it. It had been a fine old dwelling, fashioned along noble lines. The wide arching stairway climbed upward from a long hall that cut straight through the house. High-posted, square rooms gave from both sides of this central corridor. Echoes trod on the heels of echoes with startling promptness, as if even an old house could weary of solitude and welcome human intrusion.

"Shall we search it?" asked Nancy.

"That won't be necessary," answered Steven. "You know the upper part of the house has been boarded off. Summer folk have little use for many rooms. So it's been some years since the upper half has been used at all. Also the cellar doors are sturdily spiked against intrusion."

"Now the ghost," reasoned Beth from behind the panelled staircase, "appears out of

this little door which snuggles under the stairs here. I've seen the drawings of the house. Yes," she smiled at them quizzically, "I took the flivver one day. I went to the county seat. Grandmother Stanton gave me a letter; she had Judge Travers add a postscript. I had no trouble. There were yellow drawings of the house made at the time of the disappearance. Some people thought there might be some secret passage or hidden room. So architects sounded the house over, accounting perfectly for all the space. . . . Now this little door enters a sizable store-room, a long passage-like room, which contains nothing but shelves, wide heavy shelves a foot and a half from the top."

"What's above this?"

"Library on the second floor."

Beth disappeared inside the panelled door under the staircase.

"My!" her voice came gloomily. "It's a high closet."

They followed her in. The room was a black canyon with only its wide shelves at the top. It was a singularly disappointing ghost chamber. Even Beth's enthusiasm paled slightly.

"Looks like a wild ghost chase," murmured Nancy.

Beth's disappointment was short lived. Soon she emerged briskly, and crossed the hall into the wide room which was located directly opposite that little door under the staircase.

"Suppose," she suggested, "we wait in the darkness here by the fireplace."

"I propose a fire," prompted Nancy.

"Oh, no," demurred Beth. "Phantoms are as afraid of fire as wild animals are."

"That's a positive sign that they're not to be trusted," declared Steven. "Anything that can't stand light isn't on a level. There's trickery somewhere."

"Perhaps. But if we're to solve this mystery, and we want to see anything, we might as well follow the tactics that will bring it out. If there's a hoax, maybe we can play our little joke also."

Diplomatic Nancy now succeeded in effecting a compromise.

"It's no use sitting here shivering in the dark—*all* the evening. Mr. Hepplewhite told us to help ourselves in any way to further our search. He said that there're old newspapers and wood in the kitchen closet—left by the last tenant. We'll kindle a fire, dry ourselves out,

then extinguish the embers in ample time to welcome the wraith."

For once Beth did not protest. Shortly Steven returned laden. He had a fire curling up through the wide, blackened mouth of the huge fireplace.

The three toasted themselves comfortably until they were as "dry as bones," as Beth declared quite cheerfully. Well before the hour of midnight, by Steven's wrist-watch, they permitted the fire to die down. Then they extinguished the last glowing embers with water from the kitchen. They flung themselves down to wait.

Twelve o'clock passed; twelve-thirty. The surf boomed a long, mournful cadence. The rain clacked at the darkened windowpanes like bones tapping, tapping. The old house shook and shivered under the urge of the winds. Its timbers creaked and snapped.

Nancy stifled a yawn. The hands on Steven's illuminated dial marked the hour of one.

Then, without any warning, came a faint, sighing sound that was not wind, nor creaking, crumbling walls. That well of darkness under the winding stairs no longer remained empty air.

As if exercised by the will of some wicked

djinn something glimmered and floated there, leering at them full from the blackness.

"T-the d-death's head!" stuttered Steven, in whispered excitement.

There, faintly but discernibly danced the outlines of a bleached skull with sunken sockets and toothless, yawning jawbones.

Crash! A dull thud. Something dropped to the floor.

But the skeleton head still hovered there, quite unmindful of the knot of wood which Steven had accurately aimed at it.

"My eye! Went right through it," muttered the boy, as if disbelieving what the three of them had actually beheld.

Then he crept stealthily but swiftly towards the spectre under the stairs.



PART II

THE WHITE SKULL

A wafer of white pitted the darkness. It seemed to swim through the murk like a globe-fish in black waters.

The girls heard Steven's "Not a thing!" His voice was amazed, incredulous.

Beth and Nancy crept forward. They edged near the spot where he still flung the Cyclops' eye of the electric torch he had concealed in his pocket. Nancy deliberately lighted a candle. The light flared uneasily as if even a candle could acquire ragged, shaken nerves.

Nancy held the taper high. Its unsteady gleam flickered over the dull, burnished under-surface of the winding stairs, on the panelled, low door with its substantial knob and key-hole. Yet nothing stirred.

Beth reached for Nancy's candle.

"Please," she entreated. "Wait!"

Swiftly she turned the knob on the little door under the stairs. She crept cautiously to one side. Her eyes were downcast, as if she were in deep reverie over the inexplicable occurrence they had just witnessed. She

stooped down and held the candle near the dark floor. Then she smiled at them impishly. Still edging close to the door she came back.

"Well?" queried Steven flatly. "Does the skeleton leave calling cards behind it?"

"The handwriting's there," declared Blunder-Beth. "But it isn't on the wall. Hurry, please. Follow me! No time's to be lost. Ridiculous, I call it! Ridiculous! Why a death's head should insist upon playing havoc with this defenseless old house is beyond me!"

She raced up the stairs, calling back to Steven, "Please bring along that sturdy hatchet you found in the kitchen cupboard."

Steven obediently disappeared. Nancy followed Beth. Their footsteps rang awkwardly loud in the emptiness as though unseen amplifiers broadcast their every movement on mischievous winds.

"Gracious!" whispered Blunder-Beth, "we sound like a flock of camels clattering up!"

"More like wooden shoes on cobbles," murmured Nancy from behind her.

They heard Steven returning with elephantine tread. It seemed as if his boyish footsteps set the rheumatic old house to trembling afresh. Odd how their fancies ran riot. Blackness has a way of vesting bogies with

reality. Sometimes the unseen is infinitely more vivid than that which can be weighed or measured.

Steven examined the rusty nail-heads which held the boards across the disused door.

“Nothing disturbed for some time. See the thickness of that rust!”

“Perhaps,” suggested Nancy, “metal rusts and films more quickly with the salt air forever seeping over it.”

Steven expertly wedged the hatchet blade under the loosened boards. A long, protesting snarl emerged, as if some monster had been rudely awakened from sleep.

Beth pressed her fingers tightly to her ears and clamped her teeth together, declaring, “It gives my teeth the shivers. Feels as if I were chewing rust myself.”

Steven pried loose the three lowest boards. These revealed the substantial knob and key-hole. He stooped and tried the knob.

“My! Here’s fortune! Quite unlocked!”

“Why double-lock a boarded door?” queried Beth, as she wriggled in on all-fours, a very eager but undignified small figure.

Nancy followed at her leisure.

Steven’s electric torch dove here and there in the room. There was a brick fireplace on

one side with a mantel above it. There were four deeply recessed windows with netted small panes. The room was finished in time-touched white.

Beth stood with her candle light falling on the polished floor. Then swiftly she ran in turn to each one of the recessed windows. She seemed to be peering out.

"Whatever do you see, Beth?" asked Nancy, shaken from her usual aplomb. "You flutter about like a frightened moth."

"Don't you see it?"

"What?" they called out in duet.

She made a clownish bow as she held the candle close to the polished floor. Then, in a stooped position, she encircled the room, holding the candle low.

"If I didn't know you——" began Nancy.

"You'd think I was walking in my sleep. wouldn't you?" laughed Beth. "Well, I don't think I'm the one asleep. Where *are* your eyes?"

"On the floor, of course," said Steven.

Finally Beth burst out, "Can't you see there's no dust on it, though it's been boarded for who knows how long? Look at the sills of these deep-set windows."

"Dust, as thick as our heads," observed Steven disgustedly.

"Some one evidently mopped up the dust from the floor," said Nancy.

"But why?" queried Steven.

"Oh, Mr. Blunderbuss," went on Beth in a mock, pained voice. "To conceal his or her movements, of course. Footsteps show up plainly on a dust-draped floor."

"Whoever heard of a ghost mopping up a floor for fear its phantom footsteps might displace the dust! I thought ghosts carried soundless wings or some sort of contrivance to keep them free from contaminating worldly solids."

"Well, this ghost was taking no chances with contaminating solids. Perhaps his wings moulted," laughed Beth.

Crossing the room she squinted up the flue in the wide chimney.

"Huh!" she told them, somewhat crest-fallen. "It's not big enough to let a child through!"

"Perhaps it's a baby ghost," taunted Steven.

"Whoever heard of a baby ghost!" flared Blunder-Beth.

But Steven stood beside her, peering owlshly up the black well that led to the roof.

" 'Tis rather stingy," he admitted. "Must be an English ghost."

"Why?" demanded Beth, her curiosity always at the boiling-point over remarks she couldn't comprehend.

"Because the English are accustomed to chimney sweeps," answered Steven in a mock voice. "And this, you will observe, my dear Watson, is an exceedingly clean flue—in fact, I might say, it is the one sootless flue it has been my privilege to meet. Have you read, Watson, my monograph on the *Suitlessness of Soot?*"

"Gracious, Steven, aren't you clever? Why, it is as free from dust as the floor!"

"May I call your attention to the infant ghost once more? Or would you prefer a baboon, a monkey——"

"Or a parrot?" flashed Beth.

"Something," mused Nancy, "uses the flue for an exit. "That's plain."

"As plain as the Suitlessness of Soot," grinned Steven.

"But why," demanded Beth, "should the whole floor space be cleaned as well?"

"The Problem of the Dustless Floor, ladies," began Steven again, "reminds me that my friend, the Emperor of Bingedabob, presented me with a crown jewel for solving a parallel problem——"

Beth was down now examining the bricks.

Ruefully she arose. "The mortar's as dark in patches as a decayed tooth," she declared. "But it's unbroken. The bricks aren't removable. . . . Oh, dearie me, I'm such a stupid! I forgot my second trap. Maybe I caught a few feathers from the ghostly pinions."

They followed her back downstairs.

"Now, don't you come over the threshold," cautioned Beth, "for you may destroy vital evidence. Your torch, please, Steven."

She flung a pallid pool of light onto the dusky floor.

"It shines near the threshold," observed Steven.

"Correct," pronounced Beth, with her grand manner returned. "And my first trap shines, lady and gentleman, because I applied a delicate coat of Nancy's waterproof ink, thinned with glycerine, deftly to the space inside the threshold."

"Glycerine," stated Steven, as if arguing aloud, "has an admirable disposition. It is quite unmoved by climatic unpleasantries. In other words, it prevents the indelible ink from drying."

"Just so," agreed Nancy.

“Well, I’ve caught a spook-autograph,” exulted Beth. “Look here! Be careful now. Right outside the rail.”

Swiftly they dropped to their knees, and examined the spot indicated by Beth’s brown finger.

“A rubber heel-print—masculine gender,” found Steven.

“Perhaps your baby ghost’ll now return to the limbo of the mistaken,” flashed Nancy.

“It’s an odd heel,” pointed out Beth. “No make I know. It’s so big and has such funny marks.”

“No,” agreed Steven, disappointedly. “I don’t know it either. There is something queer about it.”

“Now, Steven,” coaxed Beth, “won’t you please tear a sheet from your notebook? We’ll get a black-and-white of the wraith’s pedigree.”

Hastily he ripped out a page from his notebook, a clean, blank page, for Steven disliked lines, declaring they looked like “hurdles to be leaped with words.”

Painstakingly Beth clapped the paper to the print on the floor. In triumph she held up the result.

“Good,” approved Steven. “We can

identify the original from it, and that's all that's necessary."

"What an unmanly thing for a grown-up," put in Nancy. "Such a childish prank—playing spook!"

Beth now turned her attention to the sizable keyhole in the stout door. She held the torch close.

"Caught a feather," she triumphed.

They in turn studied the keyhole.

"There's a dab of white on the right side," discovered Steven. "Painted wings, Lady Beth. Is that what you deduce?"

He rolled the words as he grinned at her.

"I coated the keyhole with my prepared ink," Beth confessed. "We can't say what the white substance is yet. But we can prove that the keyhole has been tampered with."

"And the death's head was a ghastly white," deposed Steven in would-be dramatic tones.

"Chalk-white, probably," murmured Nancy. "How could a trick be turned through the medium of the keyhole?"

They were silent for a bit, trying to reason the puzzle out separately.

"It balks me at every angle," declared Steven finally. "That corpse-white skull was

the size of a human head. It couldn't possibly crawl through a keyhole."

"That's what baffles me," confessed Nancy.

Beth didn't comment on the problem. "I'm putting myself in the spook's shoes," she told them. "How would I lose my head if I were a ghost?"

"You wouldn't," chuckled Steven.

"Thanks for not beheading me, Squire Courtesy," she returned.

"Oh, dear!" Beth stood up as quickly as though somebody had pulled an invisible string. "We're all solids after all—perfect blockheads."

"Now, what's wrong?"

"We should have seen to it that some one hasn't run away from the house."

"Impossible," denied Steven. "The darkness would blind the eyes of an army."

"I suppose so," admitted Beth slowly. "My, but I'm famished, positively hollow."

"Three hours to daylight," Steven informed them from his watch. "Listen. It's no longer raining. The house is motionless. Which means that the wind has blown itself out to sea. Now you girls must try to obtain the regulation forty winks. I'll hack out a rud-

der from the barrel-head in the kitchen. We'll salvage the *Blunder-Beth & Co.*"

Steven disappeared to his tedious task.

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Nancy was aroused by the sensation of light coloring her eyelids. It was almost as though her rest had been interrupted by some sound. Had it?

"Beth," she murmured sleepily, "I wonder if——"

Nancy became conscious that her voice was hollow, falling on empty air. She rubbed her eyes free from their brief sleep.

Daylight was peering in with curious eyes from the casements of the dingy windows. It swept the room with a surge of opal, which only intensified the forlornness of that gaunt interior.

"Beth, oh, Beth!"

Nancy was on her feet now. But no Beth came to instant attention under the urge of her words. And Beth slept with the proverbial one eye open. Perhaps she had gone to the kitchen to learn how Steven progressed with his make-shift rudder. Yes, of course, that would be it. How foolish to leap instantly to shivering conclusions! What was there to fear now that morning had dawned, and the storm

had blown away? Even the sea would soon glaze itself to complete smoothness.

Nancy tripped through the hall to the half open door.

"Steven!" she called. "Steven! Beth!"

No one answered as she pushed the door swiftly open.

Relief flooded back, a warm, enheartening tide. For she had suddenly felt weak to the toes.

"Oh, Steven!"

The boy flung the sleep from his eyes and stood up, a bit unsteadily.

"My word! Drowsed off!"

"Where's Beth?"

"I don't know."

"We must find her. She's such a mad-cap for impulses. One can never tell what Beth will blunder into next!"

Steven glanced at the front door.

"Key's all right. And the door's locked."

Nancy ran lightly up the broad stairs. Steven followed her. The treads registered the usual squeaking, noisy protests.

The door at the top opened suddenly, and Beth, wide-eyed, pink-cheeked, and laughing, confronted them.

"Ever hear about an early bird?"

“Yes, and also about the worm, too, that was *caught* by arising still earlier,” darkly disapproved Steven.

“You frightened me, Beth,” stated Nancy with a slight quiver in her voice.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Beth was all contrition. “Let’s sit right down on this top stair, and I’ll tell you all about it. . . . I waked up, pursued by an idea. I couldn’t help but feel that the sootless flue was very important. . . . Well, do you wish to see what’s happened? Are you rested enough?”

“Absolutely,” agreed Nancy, all animation in her new interest.

Excitedly they followed her in. Beth went directly to the fireplace. One slim arm crept inside. A faint click was heard, then a long, grating sound.

“My word!” exploded Steven. “It moves, it walks——”

“Even as it talks,” ended Beth.

Sure enough! Beth’s finger had found the secret brick that released a lever, which in turn moved the left side of the flue leading to the roof. In this way the space could be widened or narrowed at will. And the bricks were uneven enough to admit of ample toe-space for one bent on clambering out.

"Very clever!" commented Steven.

"But that's not all!" added Beth. "Now, let's just step off the brick hearth in front of the fireplace. You wait here a moment and I'll run down stairs. But mind you, keep away from the hearth!"

They heard her racing down the creaking staircase. Silence came and what seemed a long intermission. Then—

Slowly, soundlessly, the entire flat, bricked-in surface before the fireplace came up, inch by inch. It disclosed Beth's ruffled, brown bob against a wooden backing. It showed also that thin slabs of brick had been fastened by mortar into grooves on the boarded trap. The whole was neatly hinged at the upright brick surface of the fireplace.

Beth emerged while Steven extended two sturdy legs to hold the trap open while he peered below.

"Right above one broad shelf!" he discovered.

Nancy was examining the white lines which edged the bricks on three sides. Curiously enough, it was dingy, mortar-white on top, but dull silver beneath.

"How clever," she declared. "A little curved trough of tin so realistically painted

as to resemble a line of mortar. In addition, it's set neatly into a very thin channel on the wooden floor, so that it appeared absolutely even when the trap was in position."

"I tapped it by accident," confessed Beth. "It didn't sound right. I picked at it and hurt my finger on a sharp edge. See that little sliver of light. That's where my finger-nail rubbed off the false mortar, alias paint, and disclosed the tin beneath. Then I went downstairs, climbed up to the shelf, and kept pushing, until presto! I learned the trick."

"What about the roof?" asked Steven.

"I went up there too," admitted Beth shamelessly. "It's flat. There's a trellis on the sea side. It's built to look rickety, but it's as strong as you please. It dips straight down to the rocks, where the sea, the spray and the rain have blotted out any other tell-tale marks."

"What next?" queried Steven.

"If you've the rudder in shape, we must start for home. Grandmother may already have begun to worry, for fear the storm did us more damage than it actually did."

"I do hope," wished Nancy, "that she'll think we arrived before the severity of the

storm broke. We certainly should have done that had it not been for the lost rudder."

"Of which providentially she doesn't know," put in Steven.

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It was mid-forenoon and bright sunlight when Mr. Hepplewhite came stumping up the drive. The sun flecked the grass with points of phosphorus. But its bright smiling warmth had not yet dried up the heavy moisture which began to steam up from the sod.

Impatient Beth ran down the drive to meet him. In her excitement she dropped her handkerchief. The bit of white danced along behind the two. Laughingly the girl pursued it.

Nancy and Steven greeted Mr. Hepplewhite on the piazza.

"We're having a second breakfast," Nancy told him. "More coffee and waffles, we were that famished. . . . Do have some with us."

Steven drew up a big chair before the cozy table. Mr. Hepplewhite slumped heavily into it. Beth now came up the steps.

"Beth, here's your coffee."

"I—think—I—don't—want—it," answered

Beth in an odd, hesitating voice, quite unlike her own.

Nancy glanced at her sharply. She looked rather white. Of course, she was very tired. And the excitement of narrating the night's business had upset her. That must be it.

"Well?" began the old man, sipping coffee heartily. "Now, let's hear what you found."

Nancy and Steven waited for Beth to begin. But Beth only stirred uneasily. She seemed to find difficulty. Her brown face was unusually grave.

"Mr. Hepplewhite," she asked finally. "What were you doing in the closet under the staircase last night?"

The coffee-cup clattered against the saucer. Coffee splashed unheeded.

Steven and Nancy gazed wide-eyed. For Mr. Hepplewhite's face was as white as the shaking cup in his hand. His eyes clung to Beth's.

"I—I——" he began.

"Oh, please," entreated Beth.

From her pocket she produced the page from Steven's notebook. She unfolded it and held it accusingly before his eyes.

"That, sir, is the print of a heel-mark from the floor of the closet under the stairs. It

exactly matches the heel on your right boot, which now shows very plainly, with your leg crossed as it is."

Nancy's and Steven's eyes raced to the boot. Sure enough! It was a heavy heel, a rubber heel of an odd mould, evidently specially fashioned to aid him in walking.

"Also," went on Beth, "I saw these same heel-marks just now on the damp drive."

"What else do you know?" asked the old man, moistening his under lip.

"We've discovered the secret of the old house."

"What!" he exploded, half rising.

The cup and saucer fell to the piazza with a crash. The old man stood trembling, as pale as the death's head that had taunted them but a few hours before.

"Give it to me! Give it to me at once!" his voice shrilled. "I've tried for months to find it. No one must know. I promised him. I promised him."

The three stared at him, too amazed for further speech.

Weakly he sank back into the chair. "I meant no harm," he wailed. "And a promise is a promise. The artist-chap befriended me. When his unfortunate past pursued him even



"THAT, SIR, IS THE PRINT OF A HEEL-MARK"

to the island where he had hidden the bank's gold, he disappeared with the gold safely hidden. . . . He died suddenly, without ever telling me where the money was concealed. But once he had told me, almost pensively, that he wanted someone to right a wrong, someone whom he could trust. He said that the risk and the temptation were tremendous. . . . I put two and two together. He told me that the gold was misappropriated from the bank where he'd held a position of trust. He'd secreted the bullion in the house he'd built on the island. He never dared to return to this locality. I met him many states away . . .

“So I came here, located the house by careful questioning, and purchased it. Then my great idea. I would keep the mystery surrounding the disappearance warm. And I'd go further and give the house a ghost. It would free me from unwelcome intrusion while I searched for the gold. In order to arouse no suspicion I would lease the house. . . . When you youngsters wished to see the ghost, I thought I'd humor you. I hoped to allay your curiosity permanently. I never dreamed that you'd locate the missing money——”

“Ah,” protested Nancy gently, “but we haven’t, Mr. Hepplewhite. We only discovered the secret trap and the movable wall in the flue.”

Silence seemed to thunder about them.

Then Mr. Hepplewhite leaned back and laughed brokenly.

“I don’t know whether I’m glad or sorry,” he confessed. “I’m sick of searching for the money, and of playing this foolish hoax. Yet a promise is a promise. I must go on, leaving no stone unturned. And should I find it, it will go back to the bank in some anonymous way——”

“We wish you luck,” murmured Steven. “And we pledge you our word that we’ll tell no one what we know. We’re sorry that Beth’s words misled you.”

“Yes, indeed,” echoed Beth. . . . “But Mr. Hepplewhite, how *did* you get the death’s head through the keyhole?”

The old man chuckled softly to himself. He reached in a pocket and pulled out a flat, delapidated wallet.

“Now shut your eyes,” he commanded.

There came a faint, sighing sound like that they had heard under the stairs.

“Ready!”

A black, inflated toy balloon dangled before their eyes. On it was most realistically painted a grisly white skull.

"Just like Black Art," he said proudly. "All I had to do was to take it before it was blown up, put a slim pencil inside, and press it through the round part of the big keyhole. Then presto! a breath brings a ghost!"

"Well, I've always heard," laughed Blunder-Beth, "that ghosts were nothing but air. Now I know it!"

FINIS







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